The Art of Espionage

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The Art of Espionage

by Abbie_Lauren2024

Summary

When Kaito was forced to flee from his abusive clan, the least he expected was to stumble across an abandoned young bee and start working alongside an ambitious crocodile as a private investigator. But now, with a new name and a ragtag new group of friends, he finally starts to believe that perhaps he is truly free for good.

But *no one* betrays the clan.

And the past has a way of catching up to you.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Arc 1: Prologue

Chapter Summary

> ”They’re beautiful, Dokura San.” Yuki smiled as she helped dry off the young chameleon hatchlings, gently running a towel over their tender scales as they chirped in pleasure. The first hatchling was noticeably larger than his brother and a dark forest green color, the second one already working on his balance and bearing deep yellow scales. Of course they would learn to change their colors to blend into their surroundings, but it was a common belief among their kind that children were born with the hue that would represent their future. Green and yellow were often associated with liveliness and courage, both promising colors for their royal lineage. “Ketsu is slim but healthy, and Mugai looks like he will become a great ninja like his father.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, happy Chaotix Tuesday! And welcome to my new Espio origins fic!! This chameleon shot up to one of my favorite characters after the casefiles, and after finding a sad amount of Espio-centric, plot-centered fics out there for him I decided to change that lol ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten years ago…

”They’re beautiful, Dokura San.” Yuki smiled as she helped dry off the young chameleon hatchlings, gently running a towel over their tender scales as they chirped in pleasure. The first hatchling was noticeably larger than his brother and a dark forest green color, the second one already working on his balance and bearing deep yellow scales. Of course they would learn to change their colors to blend into their surroundings, but it was a common belief among their kind that children were born with the hue that would represent their future. Green and yellow were often associated with liveliness and courage, both promising colors for their royal lineage. “Ketsu is slim but healthy, and Mugai looks like he will become a great ninja like his father.”

”Why has the third one not hatched yet?” Dokura demanded, her deep crimson scales brighting slightly in aggravation. “It’s been far too long.”

”Is something wrong with the egg, Yuki?” Kuroshi, the leader of their clan, demanded, and Yuki paled.

”N-no, San.” She stammered, glancing over at the egg in worry. She knew that tone. “I’m sure your final child will hatch soon. Perhaps I could offer some assistance…”

”No.” Kuroshi growled, and Yuki flinched. “If a hatchling is not strong enough to free itself from it’s egg then it is not strong enough to survive in the outside world. Especially not in our clan. You know this.”

”Yes but…” Yuki trailed off as she glanced over at the final egg, dread building within her. She had seen eggs be discarded far too often to be naive of what happened to the weak, but after watching over these three unhatched chameleons for so long she had grown attached. She sucked in a sharp breath and nodded. “Of course. I apologize.”

”Good. I will not have a weak child to dishonor our legacy.” Kuroshi glanced at the egg with distain. “Our children will grow and compete for leadership of the entire force. I will not be bothered with this one, as it has been far too long. You can take it away now—it is probably dead.”

Yuki’s stomach dropped to her feet as the dismissive tone. Take young Kaito’s egg? To the cliffside? Where, to ensure he wouldn’t later hatch and suffer, she must…

”Yuki. Now.” Kuroshi demanded, and Dokura nodded.

”It must be done. No use in prolonging the inevitable.” She added, and Yuki quickly scooped up the egg into her arms. Her tail tightened it’s coil in apprehension as she quickly bowed and hurried out, leaving the other two to imprint on their parents.

She hurried through their village, head down as the other chameleons habitually made way for her hasting figure. It was well known that the vibrant teal kunochi was the head servant to their clan leaders and was to be respected without question, and she wasn’t one to complain. They treated her like their own daughter although she knew she would never succeed them, and although she was well acquainted with the order of their clan she was never quite at ease with various customs.

Especially not the discarding of late hatchers.

She could understand the strict rules of never leaving the village without proper reason and never conversing with anyone outside the clan, since those were in place for their own protection. But other orders such as outcasting the weak and disposing of eggs? Yuki’s own mother was staying in a village nearby of elderly chameleons who were too sick to serve the clan any longer, and although she missed her terribly what was she supposed to do?

If there was one rule above all the others, that was to never leave the clan.

Never *disobey* the clan.

Never disrespect the clan leaders.

Weakness lead to banishment, but betrayal lead to death.

Yuki was brought back to the present when she felt the egg in her arms jolt slightly, her heart stopping in her chest. She hurriedly set the egg down and watched it intently, not daring to help it hatch but still hoping that the youngling inside would be strong enough. “Come on Kaito… please… you can do it…”

There! A small pip had appeared in the side of the egg where the child’s horn has pierced the shell, a few more cracks running along the side as the hatchling strove to escape. Yuki’s heart leaped in her chest as it’s horn rammed the side of the egg again, struggling hard to get it’s head out. “Yes… yes you are doing so well… be the warrior you are destined to become.”

Finally a small purple head broke through the ivory shell, the young chameleon’s eyes still tightly closed as he panted from exertion. Grimacing slightly he turned his head to the side, using his horn to break more of the already-fractured egg as his little legs kicked in the back to separate the two halves of the shell. The moment he was free Yuki scooped him up, hugging him close to her chest and trying to help him keep warm.

The small chameleon was one of the most precious things she had ever seen, with a bright yellow horn and slightly smaller than usual but that was nothing to be worried about as she was certain he would grow. She glanced over at the cliff she had been heading towards, stomach churning as she thought about how close this child had been to never even making it out of his egg. Now at least she could bring him back with her where he would be reunited with his parents and brothers, able to honestly tell them that he had hatched by himself before she could dispose of him.

With a soft smile she looked back at his beautiful purple scales, the color of nobility and wisdom. She believed it had to be a good omen for someone who had escaped the jaws of death and emerged into the world with a predestined purpose to rise to leadership of his clan. She gently drew him closer to herself as he shivered. “Welcome to the world, young Kaito.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Kaito has finally come into the world! Boy he has no idea what’s in store…

See ya in the next chapter! ^^

Chapter 2: Will You Never Learn?

Chapter Summary

> *The present…*
>
> Kaito scrambled to his feet and got back in position, tail curling behind him in agitation. How could he have let his father knock him down like that? And in front of his *brothers* no less? He could hear Mugai chortling behind him until his father looked over, the icy glare of his elder causing him to immediately sober.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to the second chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D
>
> As always comments and kudos are appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The present…

Kaito scrambled to his feet and got back in position, tail curling behind him in agitation. How could he have let his father knock him down like that? And in front of his *brothers* no less? He could hear Mugai chortling behind him until his father looked over, the icy glare of his elder causing him to immediately sober.

”This is not a game, my sons.” Kuroshi told them firmly, eyes narrowing as his shining black scales dulled a bit in disappointment. That glare turned to Kaito, who shrank a bit on instinct. The action only seemed to vex Kuroshi further. “Do not cower away from me, Kaito. A true warrior never retreats and never shows fear to his enemy.”

”I apologize, father.” Kaito straightened, getting back into position and mentally chiding himself for being weak. “We can—“

Kaito yelped as Kuroshi suddenly disappeared from sight, signaling that their training was about to begin again. The younger chameleon immediately transformed his purple scales to vanish as well, less smoothly than his father but he was still learning. The dojo became deathly silent as the two ninjas prepared to spar, both Ketsu and Mugai holding their breaths. Kaito glanced over at his dark yellow brother, remembering how he would help him with learning stealth. The youngest chameleon knew how it was—his parents never tried to hide

the fact that he was a late hatcher from his knowledge and it only motivated him to work harder. He was very clearly the scrawniest of his brothers with oversized feet that he tripped over often, Yuki doing her best to prevent the teasing but unfortunately unable to do anything about Mugai's headstrong urge to finish a fight. While Ketsu would acknowledge that his little brother was down and back away honorably, Mugai would take advantage and pounce, pummeling Kaito until his father finally snapped at him to stop.

"You are strong, Mugai. A force to be reckoned with." Their father would say. *"But strength without honor is a dangerous thing. Where is your dignity? Where is your sense? You must learn to ensure that your mind is as healthy as your body."*

Mugai hated that saying. Late at night after Yuki would extinguish their candles and the brothers would whisper to each other the eldest would voice his frustrations. *"I don't understand. Our clan operates on showing ourselves no mercy, and if I am strong enough to eliminate my target then why shouldn't I to get it over with faster? Isn't Father always telling us that we must have strength to maintain peace?"*

"We are hard on ourselves so that we may show mercy to others." Ketsu reasoned. *"We need to protect our clan and help the weak get stronger. Everyone will look up to us one day for answers, and what kind of village will we lead if we show them that brute force is the way to get what you want?"*

"Yuki says that inner peace should be esteemed higher than power." Kaito added quietly, and Mugai scoffed.

"You both are wimps. Besides, you know it'll only be one of us to lead after we defeat the others in the Final Trial." He huffed. *"Why do you think we're hiding away in this tiny little village when we could be out there asserting our superiority over all of Mobius? I've heard that there's this guy called Dr. Eggman who's terrorizing everybody and the only one keeping him at bay is this hedgehog kid around our age and a couple other Mobians who might be even younger."*

"Wait, what?" Ketsu sat up in his bed. *"Now how did you get news of the outside world? We're not supposed to—"*

"Yeah yeah, rules and customs or whatever." Mugai rolled over. *"Mind your own stupid business, Ketsu. Do you* want *me to come over there and bash your head in?"*

The conversation had died out after that, but it had never left Kaito's memory. Yes they would banish the sickly and older chameleons who refused to pull their weight anymore, but if they were still willing to fight to get better then the rest of the clan would come along side them to help them return to full health. It was all about serving the village and how they could all support each other—even if the only thing one could do was bake or weave then they were still tolerated. It was the indolent souls who wished to die in peace who got their indirect desire—banished from the clan forever and having their name dishonored.

"Kaito!" Ketsu yelped, and Kaito snapped back to reality when he realized he'd been daydreaming. Adrenaline surged through his system as he struggled to get his scales to turn

invisible again, suddenly tackled to the floor by his father and having his face pressed into the rug. Kuroshi's eyes were blazing, and he turned over to his second-eldest as well.

"Ketsu!" He barked. "This is a sparring exercise! How will he ever learn if you warn him of my approaches?"

"I'm… I'm sorry father…" Ketsu paled, and Kuroshi sighed.

"As you should be. But the responsibility lies on the one who had shown such weakness as to *need* assistance." Kuroshi's other hand came to grab the back of Kaito's neck, holding him in place as the child fought the urge to squirm. "Well, Kaito? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I apologize, Father." Kaito choked out, every primal instinct in him screaming to try to get away. "It won't happen again."

"You've said that countless times and have yet to follow through!" Kuroshi growled and Kaito flinched. Wrong answer. "It is better to not promise rather than to promise and not fulfill. Better to be merely incompetent than a liar as well. Remember that."

Kuroshi got off and stepped back, and Kaito nearly sighed with relief. Mind dulled from exhaustion and adrenaline, he began to stand as well.

That was a mistake.

"Did I give you permission to rise?" Kuroshi snarled, and on instinct Kaito vanished from sight, scales turning invisible despite the proven knowledge that attempting to escape punishment counted as disobeying the clan customs. Combine that with the disrespect of standing too early and Kaito knew he had messed up. Again. "Kaito, show yourself! Our sparring is over!"

Well he was too deep in now. He remained invisible and held his breath, silently backing away and doing his best to tread lightly, panic rising as phantom pains of getting choked, beaten or cut ached across his skin. He already had violet bruises blossoming across his scales from yesterday! How many times would he fail until he finally learned his lesson?

"Kaito, returning to my sight is a direct order." Kuroshi growled. "You know what happens when you disobey!"

Both his brothers stiffened along side him, Ketsu's wide, guilty eyes darting around the room in fear for his youngest sibling. Kaito almost felt sick, fight-or-flight refusing to let his scales return to their usual purple hue. Although he knew that it was foolish there was a terrified stubbornness in him that decided to try to prolong the inevitable. Upon realizing this his father took a deep breath and closed his eyes, becoming deathly still.

The room was so silent one could hear a pin drop, and Kaito hardly dared to breathe. He strained his muscles to balance although his heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that he was certain his Father could hear it as well. His brothers glanced at each other in apprehension, but neither dared to disturb Kuroshi's focus as the time ticked on. Kaito's

muscles burned from holding his awkward position and his lungs screamed, eventually persuading him to dare to inhale the tiniest amount of oxygen.

Kuroshi's eyes flashed open. With breakneck speed he leapt into the air and kicked out his leg, foot colliding with the side of Kaito's head. The young chameleon cried out in pain as he hit the floor hard, scales flickering from the blow. His father was upon him in an instant, holding him to the ground with a cool anger in his eyes. Kaito bit his tongue to keep from whimpering, ears ringing and a headache pounding behind his eyes.

"Will you never learn?" Kuroshi's grip tightened, fingers digging into Kaito's skin and causing him to wince. "What it means to defy *me*?"

"I'm sorry?" Kaito tried, but they both knew it was far too late.

"Ketsu, Mugai, leave us. Your brother will return to you when we are done." He demanded, and both chameleons scrambled to their feet without needing further motivation. They hurried out of the room, Ketsu sneaking back a final, apologetic glance before he shut the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, I'm sure that Kaito won't internalize the perfectionism of his father at all, she said convincingly hehe ;)

See ya in the next chapter, and thanks for reading! ^^

Chapter 3: Success Begins In The Mind

Chapter Summary

“Ow!” Kaito winced as Yuki gently wrapped a bandage around his upper arm, covering the stinging cut from his father’s kunai. The teal chameleon glanced up apologetically.

”I am sorry, Kaito. The medicine will make it feel better, I promise.” She began to tie off the cloth. “And I need to make sure no infection gets in, so it has to be tight. Besides, you cannot let it show that it hurt you.” He grip tightened slightly. “A true ninja must *never* let others know that they have gotten through.”

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to another chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

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”Yes, I know.” Kaito looked down. “But I’m still gonna get pummeled in the Trial at the end of the week, aren’t I?”

”Now don’t say that.” Yuki gently told him, and he sighed.

”Right, I apologize. *I am going to be utterly obliterated in the Final Trial at the end of the week.*” He corrected, and Yuki gave him a look.

”You cannot speak like that.” Yuki gently tapped a finger against her temple. “Success begins in the mind. If you cannot see yourself as an overcomer than you will never be able to achieve victory in life.”

Kaito sighed, looking down. “I know, Yuki. I’m apologize.”

Yuki gently reached out to grab his chin and turn his head back to face her, golden eyes meeting deep blue ones. “You have no need to apologize, Kaito. You are still young and learning.”

”But Ketsu and Mugai are already far stronger than me!” Kaito protested, feeling an ache in his chest. It was true—both his brothers were healthy, strong chameleons for their age while Kaito was always playing catch up. Yuki had explained to him about how late hatchlings could occasionally have developmental issues but often grew into healthy adults, but it didn’t help his conscience. *This* was why they disposed of eggs that didn’t hatch on time.

He wasn’t supposed to exist, and he was only proving that to his family.

And soon to the entire Shinobi Clan when they saw him fail in the Final Trial, where he and his brothers would fight for dominance of the village and prove their strength and dedication —not only to their tribe but also to the art of ninjitsu.

”Kaito, listen to me.” Yuki told him firmly. “A ninja’s greatest strength lies not in his body, but in his mind. Where muscle and litheness will fail you, your spirit will remain strong and fierce in times of hardship.”

”Yeah, but a strong body seems like a pretty good advantage too.” Kaito grumbled. “What good is a vibrant mind if Mugai breaks all of my bones?”

”And what good is a body if your spirit is broken?” Yuki challenged. “I’m sure you will find that the former is to be preferred. It might not seem like that now, but it is the truth.”

Kaito shrugged, and Yuki shook her head before continuing to bandage him in silence. He could understand where she was coming from, but *she* couldn’t understand the amount of pressure he was under. He had expectations! A clan of trained ninjas watching his every move and looking up to him as their potential leader! One small step and he would let them all down and prove that he was never worth hatching in the first place.

This… this was all he was.

The clan was everything.

Nothing before it and nothing to come after it.

He and his fellow chameleons were born to serve the clan and then die to make way for new warriors to be raised. It was the way of life, and who was he to wish for anything else?

Still… he had to wonder if there was something else out there beyond the sea and sky, a horizon that lit up with fire at sunset and whispered promises of hope and something more to life. He would often go to the cliff’s edge with Yuki to meditate, watching the light fade and the darkness creep in.

He liked the darkness.

It was a time when everyone else was asleep and it seemed as though he had the whole *world* to himself, if only for a moment until Yuki decided that it was time for him to rest. But when

he looked up at the multitude of stars he felt so… small. Not in an intimidating way, such as when his father looked at him, but as if he were merely living in a small corner of a great world with endless possibilities just waiting to be explored. There was no one to yell at him, no one to punish him… just gentle moonlight and strong, old trees that Kaito was certain had to be ages old. They simply remained firm and steadfast through all the seasons and storms that came upon them, and Kaito often supposed that it was a peaceful life to be a tree. Of course he never brought up his musings to his family, but it gave him some semblance of comfort to wonder about life and all that it could offer if he ever had the opportunity to become more than just the disappointment he knew he was.

”Kai!” Ketsu burst into the room, causing both chameleons to turn and look at him. Ketsu shifted his weight nervously, eyeing the bandages and bruising along Kaito’s body. “I… I apologize for calling your name like that. It was reckless and you would’ve just gotten knocked down instead of in this much trouble had I not…”

”It’s okay.” Kaito told him, looking down. “Father was right. It was my own fault.”

”But it wasn’t!” Ketsu protested. “Not entirely at least!”

”It was. I should’ve been more focused, and I can’t always depend on you to bail me out. He was only trying to prepare me for real life.” He glanced back up at his brother. “…But I appreciate you trying, anyway, even if Mugai will probably show us both up once we turn ten.”

”I understand that you two will have to fight against each other in the Trial, but mercy and aiding those you care about is not always a weakness. In fact, loyalty and companionship can be one’s greatest strength, as a threefold cord is not easily broken.” Yuki commented, and both chameleons looked over at her. She smiled gently. “Just because Mugai is stronger does not mean that he is by default the best leader. The head of the clan must be fierce, yet calm. Strong, yet gentle. Swift, yet observant.”

”So Mugai is halfway there.” Ketsu mumbled to Kaito, who snorted in amusement. Yuki hid a smile.

”I’m sure that you both will do wonderfully in the Trial, and know that they are not just observing who dominates the fight.” Yuki commented vaguely. “They will not simply be judging based on *who* wins, but *how* they win.”

”Yeah, it’ll really be fun for our ghosts to watch them debate all that.” Ketsu sighed. “Hey Kai, wanna spar a bit later? It might help get your mind off things, and I’m sure Father will be pleased to see it.”

”Thanks, but I think I’m going to go meditate for a bit.” Kaito hopped off his cot, bowing slightly to Yuki. “I am indebted to you, Yuki. I appreciate your assistance.”

Yuki shook her head fondly at his formal expression of gratitude. She stood as well, smoothing out her kimono and bowing her head in acknowledgement. “Of course, Kaito. Go rest your mind for a bit and enjoy yourself. I’ll call you when it’s time for dinner…” She

hesitated at Kaito's look, sighing. "Of course Kuroshi wouldn't allow you supper. I'll call you when it's time for bed then."

Kaito nodded, hurrying off towards the door. Of course hunger would irritate him but it'd be less noticeable if he was doing something he loved.

He would know.

Mugai scowled as he threw another shuriken, watching it sink into the soft bark of the tree with a satisfying *thwack*. He let fly another, and then another, determination surging through his bones as he forced himself to train harder.

He was *going* to win the Trial.

He had to.

His brothers were simple minded and weak, but he could imagine the greatness their clan could achieve if only they would use their training for conquering instead of merely defending. He was no stranger to their creed that ninjas are 'born in the darkness to live in the darkness', practitioners of their art believing that preserving peace of mind and refusing to engage in the trivial busyness of the world was to be valued over glory and fame, but what good was being a great ninja if no one knew except yourself? He couldn't understand why anyone would choose that fabled 'inner peace' over making a mark in the world, and he would be the leader to finally make a change and lead a charge to make his name feared in all of Mobius.

The clan wanted peace? Then he would make everyone terrified to cross his path.

He would not die feeling this weak.

"You only shame yourself with your temper, Mugai."

"You failed again. You bring dishonor upon us all with your imperfection."

"You are restrained by your physical limits, my son. The only way one can extend those limits is through the strengthening of their mind."

Mugai bristled at the thoughts of his father's harsh admonitions, harshly throwing a few more shurikens. He'd seen firsthand what strength can do! In all their spars he would easily overpower Kaito, who supposedly had 'the clearest mind'. His mind was empty if anyone asked Mugai, and he needed to focus. Ketsu was more of a challenge, physically and mentally capable, but he spent far too much time perfecting his techniques instead of giving the fight everything he had. He argued that sparring was for honing your skills, but Mugai preferred to win.

All he wanted was his father's approval, but if he couldn't achieve that then the second best thing was to prove that his way was superior.

He *was* going to win.

No matter what.

“Mugai!” Called out a casual voice, and the ninja whipped around with a weapon raised on instinct. A chuckle echoed from the shadows before an older ninja with scales the color of the dark bark of the trees around them stepped out, raising his hands to show he was unarmed. “Your technique is improving.”

”You think so?” Mugai turned to nod approvingly at the proof of his aim. “It’s bold of you to come so close to the village, Riku. You know what will happen if Father catches you anywhere near here after your banishment.”

”Please, we’ve been training together far too long for such formalities.” The chameleon chuckled. “Call me Uncle.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Mugai isn’t alone…

Thank you for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 4: Sweet Authority

Chapter Summary

Kaito took a deep breath, staring out over the sea and swinging his legs comfortably as he sat on the cliff's edge. He made sure to keep his gaze above the jagged rocks below him where his egg was almost shattered to his demise, trying not to think about how many hatchlings' lives had ended before they could truly begin. He thought it an awful thing that those young chameleons might've been ready to hatch and meet the world, but just because they took a bit too long they had that opportunity ripped from them.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! :D

I hope you enjoy, and as always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito took a deep breath, staring out over the sea and swinging his legs comfortably as he sat on the cliff's edge. He made sure to keep his gaze above the jagged rocks below him where his egg was almost shattered to his demise, trying not to think about how many hatchlings' lives had ended before they could truly begin. He thought it an awful thing that those young chameleons might've been ready to hatch and meet the world, but just because they took a bit too long they had that opportunity ripped from them.

He lifted his eyes to the large silver moon that watched over the night, it's starry friends twinkling in companionship as they strove to offer what little light they could to the darkness. Kaito's tail swayed as he thought about it, the imagery making his heart warm with pleasure. There was such beauty all around them and it was strange how much he could get caught up in training and worrying over disappointing his clan when in reality it was all a small pebble on the mountain of life. Their village was so quaint while Mobius was so big… why were they not allowed to go out and explore the world they lived in? Kaito knew that it was dangerous out there, but they were trained ninjas! Why could they not go experience all life had to offer?

Everything was about their clan. They were born into the clan, lived to serve the clan and then died to make way for new clan members. They were told that it was a great purpose, but in the end what did it profit anyone? So their small village survived, but the world was so much bigger than themselves. What was their impact on the greater picture?

And why was it so forbidden to leave?

If it was for their own safety, then shouldn't they be the ones to choose to take the risk? So why were they stuck there?

Kaito let out a sigh, closing his eyes and feeling a light breeze whisper past his face with a pleasant chill. He'd turn ten years old at the end of the week, and it was tradition for the Final Trial to take place then. Everyone would be watching him fail that day, so what was he even still doing here? He knew he'd be dishonored for the rest of his life! Maybe he'd be able to find a lower place in the clan, but he'd never be able to go anywhere without those looks of disappointment following him. He'd never escape the whispers of the village gossips who chittered among each other that they had always known he wouldn't make it. He was a late hatcher, he was far too clumsy with his scrawny body and oversized feet, he never compared to either of his brothers in combat, and he always preferred the company of the moon and stars instead of his fellow ninjas.

He thought too much and trained too little.

He was a coward who ran away from punishments he deserved.

"Kaito?" Came Yuki's soft voice, but the young chameleon still immediately scrambled to his feet and into a defensive stance anyway out of habit from other times when he'd been interrupted daydreaming. Yuki's eyes softened and she raised her hands in a calming gesture. "It's okay, it's just me. It's time for you to get some sleep."

Kaito's heart dropped. "Now? But… but it's…"

"Darker than Kuroshi's scales out here. The sun has gone to bed, and now so must we." Yuki's eyes softened as she saw him look back at the moon. "What have you been mediating on?"

Kaito bowed his head. "Nothing, Yuki. Just… could we stay out here for a few more minutes? Please?"

Yuki hesitated before nodding. "No more than five minutes, Kai. Please do not argue with me on this."

"I won't." Kaito sat back down on the cliff's edge, staring up at that large moon watching over the world with it's gentle light. Yuki joined him and followed his gaze.

"Darkness is one of a ninja's greatest strengths." She commented softly, and he glanced over at her. "We move in the shadows, unseen and unheard. It covers our intentions so that we may keep to ourselves, seeking peace rather than glory. It is a time where the world is silent, as if nature itself is finally taking the opportunity to breathe and renew."

Kaito smiled slightly, knowing that Yuki shared his appreciation for flowery words and phrasing. He nodded along, and she nudged his shoulder with her own. "You are not the only one still learning, Kaito. Your brothers might exceed you in physical training, but they have a

long way to go in terms of learning to clear their minds. It is easier to train and strengthen your body than to learn true inner serenity."

"I don't know if that's true, Yuki." Kaito murmured. "I need to focus in my training more."

"In times of hardships, a true leader must be able to keep his mind clear and plan a course of action. What good is strength if you have no—"

"Yuki, I understand that you are trying to encourage me but I ask that you refrain from such flattery." Kaito told her firmly, and she sighed.

"I am not trying to flatter you, Kaito. I am only trying to ensure that you do not lose yourself in the clan's harsh expectations of you." She looked back at the moon, and Kaito fell silent. "I do not think that you understand what it truly means to be a ninja, and I think the rest of the clan have lost sight of it as well. They equate strength and brute force with worth. They have lost sight of compassion and inner peace. I do not want you to follow down that path, Kaito, and it seems as if you are the only heir self-aware enough to see that there might be a better way."

Kaito glanced over at Yuki's solemn face, well aware that her mother had been banished. She had become crippled after their village had been attacked, and although she had fought bravely she no longer had been able to fight like she once had. Refusing to be pushed any further she accepted banishment, but Kaito was certain that Yuki had to miss her. Their clan had been built upon the noble principles of ninjitsu but over time it seemed as though their morals had blurred.

But who was he to argue?

"Thank you, Yuki, and my apologies for talking back." He murmured. "It's probably time to head back anyway."

Yuki opened her mouth as if to say something else but changed her mind, nodding and standing up. "Of course… let's go. You have more training in the morning."

Kaito could wait.

"Good balance could be the the very factor that wins or loses a fight." Kuroshi told his sons as they each perched upon a bō staff, muscles taut with the concentration of not falling off their weapon. "If you fall, it will grant you to rise quickly. If you trip, it will aid you in remaining silent."

Mugai could feel little beads of sweat dripping down his face as he eyed the fourth staff gripped in his father's hand. Kaito and himself already had bruising welts from where they had even stricken after they had fallen down, and Ketsu was putting every ounce of his balance to good use so as not to be the next victim. Kuroshi watched them with an intense eye, and Mugai bristled slightly. This entire exercise was so stupid! Balance on a bō? When would that ever come into practical use? He became more frustrated as he got back onto his bō for the seventh time, further agitated with each fall which only disrupted his balance

further. “Mugai, clear your mind. You cannot allow past failures to hinder future success.” He heard his father tell him, always so high and mighty. Mugai took a deep breath, knowing that he only needed to reign in his temper until the Final Trial where he would be named the leader of their clan.

”Yes, Father.” He gritted out, green scales darkening as his anger simmered just beneath the surface. His staff began to wobble, and Mugai’s muscles tensed as his tail extended as a desperate counterbalance. Kuroshi ceased his pacing to watch, raising an eye ridge as his eldest son toppled to the floor again with a scowl.

Crack!

All three brothers flinched at the sound of their father’s bō against Mugai’s leg, the latter buckling to the ground but clenching his jaw and refusing to cry out. He kept his head bowed, fire erupting from the new wound as his anger helped to dull the pain.

For someone who preached peace among their clan he certainly beat his sons rather often. It extended beyond punishment for wrongdoings and seemed excessive in Mugai’s eyes.

He fleetingly wondered how his father would look if their roles were reversed, bruised and bowing before his son.

Kuroshi was silent a moment before he nodded. “You may stand.” As Mugai did, the elder’s expression darkened. “Your pride hinders you, Mugai. It clouds your vision and prevents you from moving forward.”

”Apologies, Father.” Mugai replied cooly, tail flicking in irritation although he struggled to keep his facial expression stoic. “However if balance helps you get back up, then I promise you that I will not get knocked down.”

Although Mugai thought that phrase indicated strength and a warrior’s spirit, it only seemed to irk his father further. Big surprise. “There is a difference between confidence and foolishness, my son, and no ninja can guarantee the outcome of a fight.” Kuroshi sighed, waving his hand. “You are dismissed for today.”

”*Hai.*” Came three replies, two relieved and one resentful. The chameleons made their way out of the dojo to find their mother Dokura waiting for them with Yuki. They immediately bowed to their mother, who nodded in acknowledgement.

”I am here to discuss the ceremony with you three.” She said simply, beckoning for them to follow her as she spoke. “I do believe that you know the basics of the Trial?”

”Yes Mother, it will take place in the arena in the middle of the village.” Ketsu offered, and Mugai fought the urge to roll his eyes. His brother could be such a sensei’s pet sometimes. “We will fight until the other two surrender or are incapable of getting back up.”

”That is true, Ketsu, but I do hope that you know about the prior traditions as well.” Dokura told them as they made their way to the kitchen. “Yuki, please make us some tea. Children, sit down at the table and pay attention.”

Yuki bowed and hurried to the stove while Dokura sat down, the brothers ensuring that their mother was comfortable before taking their own seats. The crimson scales of their mother became a bit more vibrant with pride as she looked upon her sons, and Mugai straightened slightly at the feeling. His mother certainly believed in him more than his father and praised his potential, less of a stickler and more understanding of the fire within Mugai. She finally nodded and spoke again. “Before the Trial it is customary for you three to be isolated. You all must meditate and renew your minds for the challenge, understanding that you soon will not be brothers, but opponents. As much as you may care for each other as members of this tribe, loyalty will not be a factor in this fight.”

”Mother, if I may ask…” Ketsu began, but a look from Dokura made him duck his head and apologize for interrupting. Mugai felt a twinge of smug satisfaction.

”Alliances can be one’s greatest strength,” Dokura’s eyes sharpened. “But it can also be a weakness. A ninja must refrain from sentimentality, whether it be to a person, place or item. Such fond feelings may hinder our judgement if a friend one day turns into an enemy and we are forced to be at odds. This trial will show our clan that you are willing to put your emotions aside for their sake.”

”I understand, Mother.” Mugai told her, a determined glint in his eyes. “The safety of well-being of this clan is my highest priority. I will make you proud.”

Dokura tilted her head. “Mugai, a ninja must never base their morals or motivations on other’s approval. We thrive because we understand how life flows smoothly when we all work together for the common goal of peace for our village, not because we are trying to rise to power or praise.”

”My apologies, I misspoke. I only meant that I will do everything I can to make certain that our great clan has the right leader.” Mugai corrected himself, and he didn’t miss how Ketsu and Kaito shared a look. Dokura nodded.

”As you all should. Fight bravely, and may the best leader prevail. Thank you, Yuki.” She commented as the teal chameleon set down cups in front of them and a beautiful teapot in the center of the table on a cloth. “As I was explaining, you three will have to keep a vigil in separate rooms prior to the Trial. Yuki will gather you all once it is time, but remember that there must be no talking among you. You must be entirely present in mind and body, and speaking will only unnecessarily distract you.”

“A vigil? Before the fight?” Ketsu asked carefully. “So we won’t sleep before the most important day of our lives?”

”Are you scared?” Mugai teased under his breath, loud enough for Ketsu to hear but quiet enough that Dokura either didn’t catch on or didn’t care. Ketsu shot him a glare, and Kaito looked down at his cup as Mugai returned Ketsu’s gaze.

”Correct. The clan needs to see how you all act when pushed to your limits.” Dokura nodded. “Your father went through this with his own siblings and prevailed.”

”But we never hear of Father’s kin.” Mugai slowly hinted, thinking back to his encounters with Riku, and Dokura’s eyes sharpened.

”They refused to let go of their pride.” She told them. “Your father was forced to banish them for disrespect. Let that be a lesson to you three—even if you lose you will need to exercise the art of humility and honor. You all grew up with each other, but one of you will inevitably rise to leadership of the clan and the other two will need to respect them as such, whether you agree or disagree with their decisions. Am I clear?”

There it was. That sweet authority to finally be rid of those who disrespected you. They all nodded and finished their tea in silence, but Mugai’s mind was buzzing with anticipation.

He would prove to them all he wasn’t weak.

And his father would see who was truly the stronger between them both.

”Eh, your father was always strict about those stupid rules.” Riku would shrug, twirling a kunai deftly between his fingers. *”You know that clan’s all about power anyways.”*

”*What do you mean?”* Mugai had asked in confusion, trying to copy his uncle and failing until Riku chuckled and helped him learn the finger placements on the blade. Yet another thing that Kuroshi would never do—help without judgement or a lecture.

”It’s all ridiculous. The leaders force their subordinates to train hard and obey them without question just to live their lives without ever setting foot outside this tiny village. There’s an entire world out there to explore and conquer, and you think you get what you want just by letting others boss you around?” Riku scoffed, pausing and looking Mugai dead in the eyes. *”Not a chance. You want other people to respect you? To give you what you want in life? Then you have to go out and* take *it. Heck, if I hadn’t’ve been banished then I probably just would’ve left! But you have a big opportunity here, don’t you? You don’t have to be Kuroshi’s pawn forever—you can win that Final Trial and then change the old ways of the clan. I can help you, too! What do you say?”*

Mugai hadn’t been sure at the time, but with every beating he received from his father over some small mistake the more his resolve grew.

Maybe Riku wasn’t the villain the clan made everyone believe he was.

He was just the only one brave enough to see a different way.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp it looks like Mugai’s making plans… and hopefully Kaito and Ketsu will be okay!

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 5: Never React

Chapter Summary

Ketsu stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep from the anxiety of knowing the Trial was the day after tomorrow. He knew he should really mediate if he was unable to rest so that the time wouldn't be wasted, but no one was watching and he was allowing his mind to wander.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreaciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ketsu stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep from the anxiety of knowing the Trial was the day after tomorrow. He knew he should really mediate if he was unable to rest so that the time wouldn't be wasted, but no one was watching and he was allowing his mind to wander.

This would be his last night before their vigil, and he needed to let go of any lingering worries about the future. As Yuki would tell them, worrying about the future was only a waste of energy when one should focus on the trials at hand. Perhaps your anxieties would never come to pass, and if they did then it would be too late to worry and only time for action. He would perform at his best during the Final Trial and hope that fate would lead the elders of their clan to make the right decision. He truly loved their village and the principles of ninjitsu, but one thing that he could never agree with was the way they shunned the weak. Wouldn't it be more honorable to lift up those who couldn't fight for themselves? To be loyal to familial ties rather than base worth upon how much they could serve?

Wouldn't that help them achieve inner peace without the stoic numbness it took to avoid sentimentality?

Another wave of anxiety hit him as he imagined having to face off against Mugai, who wouldn't take to losing easily. He would likely win due to his strength, but Ketsu knew the look in his eyes when he was about to snap. What would happen if the elders disqualified him due to his temper? Or if he injured one of his brothers dishonorably? This Trial was also about dignity and not savagely attacking those who opposed you. He could snap Kaito's bones in half if he wanted to…

No. He couldn't think about that. He just needed to stop worrying about everything and go to sleep.

"A ninja must never react. Never show weakness." Kuroshi took up one of his kunai and grabbed Ketsu's wrist. His brothers had already gone through such training, and both were staring at the wall and disassociating to keep from whimpering. He could hear Mugai's harsh breaths and Kaito's hard swallows and had dreaded his turn, but now it was here.

"Never react." His father said again, meeting Ketsu eyes. "A ninja must uphold their dignity and stoicism at all times, lest their enemy uses that weakness against them. Be wary—every small imperfection can and will be used against you. If you cannot control your own emotions, how are you supposed to lead our clan?"

With that he lowered his kunai to cut into Ketsu's arm, slowly dragging it through the skin and leaving a trail of fiery pain in it's wake. Ketsu almost stopped breathing at the sensation, eyes growing distant as he bit his tongue and stared straight ahead. Kuroshi nodded in approval. "Adequate, Ketsu. I can hear the changes in your breathing and see the adjustments in your expression, but you will learn to control that in time."

Kestu was jolted from his thoughts by a soft whimper, head snapping over towards Kaito's cot, where his younger brother was tossing and turning in his sleep. Ketsu's brow creased in concern but he refrained from going over, not wanting to embarrass the young chameleon.

Never react.

They were about to be opponents in a challenge, and were no longer young hatchlings. Kaito could take care of himself and there was no need to go over and—

Kaito sat up in bed abruptly, eyes wide and breathing hitched. He remained completely silent, old training showing through even in his half-awake state as he refused to wake up his siblings, unaware that one was already awake.

"Kaito?"

Kaito flinched away at the soft whisper, his nightmare already putting his nervous system into high alert. Ketsu finally got out of bed, brotherly instincts winning over as he walked over to the youngest chameleon. "Kaito? Are you okay? Your bedsheets are soaked…"

Kaito shook his head, and Ketsu frowned. "A nightmare, perhaps?"

Kaito hesitated, and Ketsu sighed, sitting down next to his younger brother on the bed. Kaito watched him a moment, still trembling but Ketsu could tell he was grateful for the company even if he'd never had the courage to admit it. The youngest finally spoke up. "…My apologies for waking you up, Ketsu."

Ketsu sighed. "You didn't wake me up. I couldn't sleep."

Kaito tilted his head. "Why not, if I might ask?"

Ketsu looked down. "No important reason. Just… the Trial is almost here."

It was stated as a fact, but both of them knew what he was implying. ”Do you need assistance in falling back asleep?” Ketsu asked slowly, hating how small Kaito looked in that moment. They both maintained their composure, but by the look in their eyes they both could sense the unspoken reality that neither of them wanted to be alone right now. Kaito slowly nodded, almost trembling as he fought back the lingering emotions from is nightmare. Ketsu’s eyes softened and he scooped up his younger brother into his arms. “Don’t worry, Kai. I won’t tell anyone if you don’t. Besides, your sheets are damp and surely uncomfortable, and I don’t mind the company. It’s cold tonight.”

Kaito finally gave in, nodding desperately and clinging to his brother a bit more comfortably. Ketsu hid a smile as he brought them both over to his own bed and set Kaito in first before crawling under the covers himself. Ketsu could feel Kaito’s tense muscles slowly relax in his brothers embrace, letting his eyes close and taking a deep, content sigh. Ketsu also calmed, holding his brother protectively and comfortably.

They were both asleep in minutes.

”Are you two *serious*?”

Both chameleons jolted awake at the sudden judgmental voice, and Kaito’s eyes opened to see Mugai standing next to them with a look of disapproval. “We’re not hatchlings anymore! How are you supposed to keep a vigil if you can’t even sleep apart?”

”You know we have separate beds, Mugai.” Ketsu protested, sitting up with a yawn. “Gaia, you don’t have to be cross about it.”

”Well I think it’s childish to still have to cuddle with your siblings when you have a hard night when you’re almost ten years old. We’re ninjas, and about to take the Final Trial at that!” Mugai raised an eye ridge. “What would Father say?”

”Oh just be quiet.” Ketsu snipped, getting out of bed and shivering. “It’s so cold… is the sun even out yet?”

”I thought we should all get up early to show initiative.” Mugai explained. “But apparently that wasn’t a universally acknowledged understanding between us. We’re adults today, if you have forgotten. Father has already been up for hours!”

”That’s because he never sleeps long to watch over the village!” Ketsu protested.

”And if I’m going to succeed him then I should start practicing now.” Mugai turned away, and Kaito looked down. “Come on—I’m sure that Mother would like to remind of use what preparations lie in store for the day and when the vigil starts.”

”My apologies, Ketsu.” Kaito mumbled when Mugai left the room. “I had no intentions of shaming you in Mugai’s eyes.”

”It’s okay, and it wasn’t your fault.” Ketsu hesitated. “You know, I may or may not have certain regretful emotions when we are no longer as close after the Trial. It was pleasant to

have a good night's sleep, and to commemorate childhood one final time."

Kaito blinked. Did Ketsu seriously just admit that he was going to miss sharing a room? Out loud? But they weren't supposed to…

"Come *on*, you two!" Came Mugai's impatient call, and Kaito lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I'll… share similar sentiments. Now let's go."

The day seemed to pass in a blur. They had a few final training sessions and a long time of meditating and before they knew it it was time to begin their vigil.

"Here you are, Kaito." Yuki told him as she led him to his room. Kaito looked up at her. "You will remain here until I come to gather you. Use this time to mediate, and remember—no speaking."

Kaito simply nodded, and she smiled. "Good. I'll be taking my leave now, but I do wish you the best of fortune in the Trial tomorrow. May the worthy leader prevail among you three."

She finally left after that, leaving Kaito alone with this thoughts. He sat down crisscrossed on the mat in the middle of the room, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. He needed to focus, to clear his mind and subdue his pride.

What was it that Yuki had told them? That they will not only be judged on who wins, but how that chameleon wins? That at least gave Ketsu a shot. Mugai would still likely win the fight with his strength, but who knew what honor he would maintain? He had seen it himself in training sessions—the moment his brother would *snap* and attack blindly out of anger. What if that happened in the Final Trial? Kaito shuddered, wondering how the humiliation of losing his temper might affect his brother's attacks.

"A true ninja never shows emotion." His father's words came back to him and he closed his eyes, shoving aside his worries about Mugai.

"A true ninja never cries."

"A true ninja never settles for anything less than perfection."

"A true ninja never breaks down."

"A true ninja would rather live alone than to not pull his weight in a clan."

"A true ninja would throw themself off a cliff in an instant if their leader told them to."

"A true ninja is self-sufficient and never needs to ask for help. To do so is a sign of weakness."

The phrases ran through Kaito's mind as he meditated, taking slow breaths and trying to commit them to his memory as undeniable truths. He knew that in order for any wise advice to take effect, he needed to believe them with every fiber of his being.

He needed to prove that he was worth existing.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like the Final Trial is almost here! I wonder what will happen… ;)

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 6: The Final Trial

Chapter Summary

Kaito stood perfectly still in the arena, a steep gorge filled with thick foliage where the rest of the clan could observe from the cliffs surrounding them. It wasn't quite dawn yet, the world still mysterious and dark just as it should be. A small glow was beginning to peek over the mountains, and the fight should be over before the sun rose on their new leader. He and his brothers were standing in the only meadow, waiting for the challenge to begin and clad in the uniform of Shinobi warriors for the first time with black shozokus and matching masks that covered the majority of their faces, leaving only their yellow horns visible. The fabric was of a rare material that would vanish with the chameleon, and losing it was as dishonorable as losing one's weapons.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Things are really spicing up in the next few chapters, so buckle up lol! >:D

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito stood perfectly still in the arena, a steep gorge filled with thick foliage where the rest of the clan could observe from the cliffs surrounding them. It wasn't quite dawn yet, the world still mysterious and dark just as it should be. A small glow was beginning to peek over the mountains, and the fight should be over before the sun rose on their new leader. He and his brothers were standing in the only meadow, waiting for the challenge to begin and clad in the uniform of Shinobi warriors for the first time with black shozokus and matching masks that covered the majority of their faces, leaving only their yellow horns visible. The fabric was of a rare material that would vanish with the chameleon, and losing it was as dishonorable as losing one's weapons.

Each of the brothers had carefully blank expressions, revealing nothing about their innermost thoughts save for a certain look in their eyes, such as the fierce determination in Mugai's and the stoic resolve in Ketsu's. Kaito did his best to keep his face expressionless despite the anxiety churning in his stomach.

"Begin!" Their father's voice rang out and all three brothers immediately turned invisible, Kaito turning on his heel and hurrying into the trees. If he could find a good hiding place then

perhaps he could have a better vantage point to drop on one of his brothers. Brute strength had never been his fortitude, so luring Mugai into the woods was likely his best option.

This is it. No mistakes. He mentally repeated to himself as he stealthily avoided the twigs and dried leaves littering the ground. It was difficult to do with his large feet and he was noticeably slowed down but still he persevered and finally stopped at the base of a large tree, looking up and nodding. He silently scaled the bark, wishing he had his shinobi shuko to aid his climbing. However, as they were only meant to display their natural skill in hand to hand combat, there were no weapons permitted.

His scales blended seamlessly into his surroundings as he perched on a limb, scanning the surrounding area for his brothers. Tail extended for balance, he continued making his way along the branch before silently leaping to the next tree and scanning around himself once again.

Everything was so silent, but whereas quiet had been his sanctuary now it was thick with tension. His brothers could be hiding anywhere, just waiting to attack! Besides that, the entire village would be watching him fail and would finally be proven right that he should never have existed in the first place. The best he could do was put up a good fight and hopefully they would deem him strong enough to at least be one of their warriors instead of dishonorable banishment.

He suddenly froze, a strange creeping feeling making his tail curl and his mind snap back to attention. What was going on? Every nerve was on high alert, warning almost blending into the breeze around him. He glanced behind himself with bated breath to see only foliage there, heart pounding heavily in his chest. He remained perfectly still for a long moment, listening carefully for any sign of why his intuition was screaming at him.

Thwish.

It was the smallest of sounds, almost able to be mistaken as the rustling of the leaves. But on instinct Kaito leapt to the side, barely managing to cling to another branch as he fell. He hoisted himself back up, eyes wide and alert as he glanced behind him to see a shuriken sheathed into the bark of where he had previously been perched, heart dropping down to his stomach. Weapons weren't permitted in this Trial! Where had it even come from? Kaito squinted at the dull silver object, observing the nicks and scuffs in the metal from wear. Kuroshi would never allow such an old shuriken to remain in their collection, so where—

"Kuroshi trained you well—I've hardly seen such intuition even in Shinobi's mature warriors." Came a deep voice from behind him, and Kaito nearly jumped out of his skin, the shock turning him visible again. He gasped as he scrambled to regain his hold, but before he could fall he felt strong arms envelop him and pin him back onto the branch, an invisible hand going over his mouth. A dark brown chameleon flickered into view, peering at Kaito with a strange glint in his eyes. He smirked. "You must be Kaito. Mugai wasn't kidding about your size, was he? You're the smallest ten-year-old I've ever seen!"

Kaito squirmed slightly and struggled to get his scales to vanish again, the older chameleon chuckling. "Now now don't be shy! I know this isn't much of a family reunion, but you don't have to worry. Just do as I say and I won't have to hurt you."

What on earth was going on? Kaito wriggled again in his captor's strong grip, but he suddenly turned invisible and dragged Kaito further into the shadows of the tree. "Shhhhh… looks like we have company."

He grabbed Kaito's chin and forced his head to the side so the younger chameleon could observe the forest below, at first seeing nothing but then noticing some of the stray twigs of the bushes move to the side unnaturally. He tensed up, realizing that one of his brothers must be there. He was about to renew his struggles when he felt something cold and sharp press up against his neck, his captor murmuring, "Easy now, no need to spoil the surprise."

Kaito's mind was racing. What was the stranger talking about? Was he going to hurt his brothers? Or… or try to attack the Clan or something? He could still feel the blade against his scales, but maybe if he turned the other way…

The young chameleon suddenly threw all of his strength in rolling to his right, feeling the branch beneath him tremble from the movement. The intruder hissed and reached for his falling captive, but Kaito kicked and scratched with all his might at the hand to keep it away. It latched tightly onto his tail, but Kaito heard a cracking sound as the branch gave way, sending them both toppling noisily to the ground. Ketsu flickered into view, looking bewildered at his brother scrambling away from an invisible threat. "…Kai…?"

"Go!" Kaito panicked, tripping over his own feet and face planting into the dried leaves on the ground. "Go go go!"

"What's going on?" Ketsu yelped as the intruder grabbed Kaito's leg and dragged him back, the yellow chameleon getting into a defensive position. "Is that Mugai?"

"There's an intruder! Go warn the others!" Kaito pleaded as the older chameleon came into view. He looked down in disappointment before back up at Ketsu.

"And I had so hoped that we'd be able to do this discreetly." He sighed. "But get the name right if you must—tell them that Riku has returned."

"Let go of my brother, you creep!" Ketsu snarled, only betrayed by a flicker of fear in his eyes. "*Father! Yuki! Somebody! We're under attack!*"

"Of course we're under attack! That's the point of the Trial, blockhead!" Came Mugai's voice from the foliage, and the dark green chameleon stalked out in irritation. "Now shut up before we're disqualif—" His eyes widened at the sight of Kaito being pinned down. "Riku?!"

"You know him?" Ketsu narrowed his eyes in accusation. "Care to explain yourself, Mugai?"

"Ah, my favorite nephew." Riku chuckled. "I told you I'd help you win."

"But I… I thought… but…" Mugai stumbled over his words. "But they've seen you! And stupid Ketsu is going to have the whole Clan in here at any moment! I'll be disqualified!"

"As you should be!" Ketsu snapped before glaring at Riku. "Now get off of Kaito! I don't know exactly who you are, but if you start running now then *maybe* you'll be able to outrun

the rest of the Shinobi before they get here!”

”Who said anything about running?” Riku raised an eye ridge. “I told you already, Mugai: good things never come to those who wait. If you want this then we have to act now.”

”Want what?” Ketsu demanded.

”Oh shut up, Ketsu!” Mugai snapped back. “Did you really think Father would let us have a fair fight? He already favors you anyway!”

”What are you even *talking* about?! It’s not just Father deciding—it’s the entire village! We’re supposed to fight honorably here!” Ketsu protested.

”Please! We both know that Father gets the final say!” Mugai scowled, and Riku nodded, pressing Kaito harder into the ground.

”Very true. Kuro wants someone to feed his own ego. Someone to replace him.” Riku commented. “Mugai was the only one brave enough to step outside of the village, but I’ll tell you what: if you both run away then Mugai will by default win and you won’t have to get hurt. How does that sound?”

”No!” Kaito squirmed under Riku’s grip, and Ketsu stepped forward as well.

”A true ninja would rather die with honor than flee without it.” He said firmly, and Riku rolled his eyes.

”Kuro’s words in your mouth, no doubt.” His eyes sharpened. “But that also could be arranged.”

”You both need to leave.” Mugai told them firmly. “He’s not joking about this.”

”Would you like further proof?” Riku asked cooly, and Kaito’s stomach dropped as the older chameleon withdrew a kunai from within the folds of his shozoku.

Ketsu’s eyes widened and he lunged forward. “No!”

The gold chameleon barreled into Riku, who was tackled off of Kaito. The purple ninja remained frozen for a few moments, reaching up to feel around the weird sting on his neck. His hand came back wet with crimson and he stiffened, realizing just how close Riku had been. Kaito whipped around to see Ketsu and Riku tussling, golden eyes sharpening as he leapt into the fight and dodged a swipe of his blade. Ketsu had already managed to snatch a kunai off of his supposed ‘uncle’, and all chameleons vanished into their surroundings as they fought. Kuroshi’s training spiraled through Kaito’s mind as he combatted Riku, the reality crashing down that this was no longer a training spar but his first real conflict. He dropped down and swung out his leg to take out one of his opponents, but he felt the air swish past as Riku leapt over his attack and he tripped Ketsu instead. He quickly rolled out of the way on intuition and saw a blade lodge into the ground where his leg had been moments before.

Someone suddenly crashed into him from behind and Kaito grunted as he hit the ground, training kicking in as he tucked his head and flung his attacker away. Based on the size and

sound of his gasp Kaito could tell it was Mugai, chest clenching as he got back into position and briefly closed his eyes to listen. This was the way of the ninja—combat through silence and intuition. He needed to keep his composure even when his brother was getting angrier and angrier. He heard a harsh rustling from his left and dodged as Mugai once again lunged at him, adjusting his balance before lashing out his tail to wrap around his brother's wrist and yank him off his footing. As Mugai stumbled Kaito leapt over to the other side and quickly struck to make him fully collapse. He backed up and nearly jumped out of his skin when he bumped into another invisible being, raising his hands defensively until he realized it was Ketsu.

"Have you seen Riku?" Ketsu demanded, keeping his back to Kaito's as the two scanned their surroundings.

"I thought you were fighting him! I was dealing with Mugai!" He hissed back, heart pounding in his chest.

"*I'm going to kill you two!*" Mugai roared furiously, and both chameleons tensed at the familiar tone. Kaito rolled to the side as Ketsu likewise dodged, Mugai blinding following the spot their voices had emitted from. Kaito tensed up as Ketsu thrust a kunai into his hand, ensuring that his brother gripped it before withdrawing his hand and hurrying away. Kaito squeezed the weapon in his fist, feeling the familiar weight with a strange bewilderment. He'd completely expected to be alone in the Trial—as they should be—but he was grateful that Ketsu had the sense to realize that this was no longer just a traditional custom to conclude a new leader but a very real fight that they needed to take seriously. Mugai however seemed to know their attacker, and although Kaito knew he shouldn't be surprised he still felt the cold sting of bitterness in his chest. Where was the honor in bringing in an outsider who was not bound by the laws of the Shinobi? Where was the satisfaction in aiding an enemy to their clan? And still he persisted even when Riku had made it clear that there was no place for them in his plans!

"Mugai, stop!" Kaito grit out as he dodged another attack from his brother, swiftly kicking his legs out from under him. "Where is Riku?"

"What does it even matter? We're going to win!" Mugai shouted back, grabbing Kaito's heel as he fell and taking the smaller chameleon down with him.

"You brought an enemy into the clan!" Ketsu hissed. "That's punishable by death and you know it! Gaia, what were you even thinking?!"

"I was *thinking* that none of it will matter when I'm the new leader!" Mugai yanked Kaito towards him and landed a few heavy punches before his brother managed to scramble away. "You can't be so dense as to not see that there's a better way for the Shinobi!"

"That's not my opinion to make!" Ketsu snapped. "My loyalty is to our Father, and then to whoever wins! It's just the way it is and I'm not about to lose my honor chasing some fantasy of what could be!"

"And that's what makes you weak! So just *stay out of my way*!" Mugai roared.

”Where even is Riku?” Kaito stumbled to his feet, ignoring the tremble in his limbs. “We’ve been arguing here while he’s on the loose!”

”Right, we need to protect the clan.” Ketsu agreed before Kaito heard the sharp *thwack* of Mugai landing a hit on his brother. “Are you insane Mugai?! Your anger is your weakness and it is blinding you to—”

”*I am not weak!*” Mugai all but screamed, “And shut up! Just shut up with all your high and mighty proverbs, okay? I’m not weak and I’m not giving up and you can either give up and leave now or face Uncle when he gets back!”

”Back from where?” Kaito began when shouts began to ring out from the village, causing all three brothers to flinch and turn around. There was an amber glow flickering from their home that wasn’t from the soon-to-come sunrise, and it made Kaito’s blood run cold.

”The village.” Ketsu mumbled in shock, watching the fire build. “He’s attacking the village.”

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, my finger slipped and now they’re being attacked and their village is on fire! What a tenth birthday celebration, am I right? Heh? Hehe…

See ya in the next chapter, and thanks for reading! ^^

Chapter 7: Get Up

Chapter Summary

> ”Why is he burning it?!” Kaito’s eyes grew round at the sight of the angry flames and billowing smoke. “Mugai what in chaos is this?”
>
> ”He… he didn’t say…” Mugai mumbled distractedly before shaking his head and glaring at his brothers. “It doesn’t matter! We need to get rid of the old in order to make way for the new.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Things are about to get pretty intense, hehe… :3
>
> ▶ TW spoilers below ^^
>
> I hope you enjoy! As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> ”Why is he burning it?!” Kaito’s eyes grew round at the sight of the angry flames and billowing smoke. “Mugai what in chaos is this?”
>
> ”He… he didn’t say…” Mugai mumbled distractedly before shaking his head and glaring at his brothers. “It doesn’t matter! We need to get rid of the old in order to make way for the new.”

> ”And you say that *I’m* speaking like Father!” Ketsu stepped forward, eyes blazing. “This is our home! You’re just saying that because Riku said it first!”
>
> ”He’s the only one who ever believed in me!” Mugai protested. “He’s teaching me to think independently!”
>
> ”He’s teaching you to be like *him*! He just wants leadership of the Shinobi Clan, how can you not see that?” Ketsu began before the sounds of crashing made them all flinch. “Just stay out of the way, Mugai! We need to stop Riku and can talk about this later.”
>
> ”There’s nothing to talk about!” Mugai sneered. “And it’s already too late to stop a fire that big, even a hatchling could realize that!”

”Well we have to try. A true ninja never gives up.” Ketsu turned with a determined glint in his eyes. “Come on, Kaito!”

Kaito nodded, shaking off his shock and trying to clear his mind. Yuki was still there! As was his mother Dokura… and the rest of the clan members… everyone he was supposed to protect…

”You’re not stopping him!” Mugai’s eyes narrowed and his tail flicked, causing both his brothers to look at him as if he’d gone crazy.

”Mugai, you have only one chance to explain yourself.” Ketsu told him in a low voice, scales darkening. “Why are you still so adamant on letting Riku destroy everything we know? I thought you wanted leadership of this village, but you know Father will banish you if not *kill* you for betraying him. It is the way of the Shinobi.”

Kaito stiffened, the pieces falling into place. He stumbled back, staring at his brother like a ghost that he didn’t even know. “Riku’s going to kill Father, isn’t he? That way you’d be the next in line to inherit the Clan.”

Mugai averted his eyes, and Ketsu stepped forward, tail lashing. “But that’s only after *us*. What, are you going to kill your own brothers as well?”

”Not if you both leave as Riku suggested.” Mugai muttered, and Kaito wished he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He knew that logically they were raised as opponents and that true ninjas did not let sentimentality or blood ties hinder them, but still the reality was harsh. He had been raised with these chameleons—trained with them, meditated with them, hatched with them. Was he really so weak that he felt a sort of betrayal when Mugai was ready to move on? This was why his Father shunned him and the village knew he wouldn’t be a good leader: he was stuck in his head. Physically his brothers were simply other beings walking on Mobius, but mentally he was allowing fond memories to sway his resolve.

Golden eyes met dark chocolate ones as the brothers stared at each other, Kaito’s purple scales dulling slightly as he grappled with all that was happening. It was his tenth birthday today! The ritualistic time for the Trial they’d been training their entire life for! He hadn’t expected anything good to come out of the fight, but he’d also expected something more… certain. Something filled with a sense of closure for his season of training and filled with resolve for what was to come. An honest fight that ended in an honest outcome.

Not this strange new dystopia he’d been thrust into, where his own brother committed a treason punishable by death and his long-lost uncle was prepared to murder his father for power.

”Kaito, focus!” Ketsu shouted, and Kaito was shaken from his thoughts. “Leave Mugai, we need to do what we can to help the village! Come on!”

”Aww, look at you two buddying up!” Mugai mocked. “*’Oh look at us! We’re the perfect team!’* Relational and cooperative ties are nothing but anchors to those who hold you back. Why wait for others when you can do better alone? But then again you two were always weak and—“

”Bite your tongue!” Ketsu snapped. “Kai, ignore him and let’s go.”

”One of us can round up survivors while the other evacuates the village.” Kaito agreed. “Unless we both target Riku first to ensure he won’t do any more damage.”

”Like chaos you will!” Mugai snarled, eyes going almost manic. None of the three noticed the footsteps approaching—light and soft just as they should be.

”Mugai, we won’t let you finish this!” Ketsu exploded, and Mugai froze, looking between the two of his brothers with a strange expression. He was completely silent, and when his eyes met Kaito’s the purple chameleon got a strange feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. Mugai’s eyes didn’t match the situation in the slightest, and whereas he had been angry and explosive before now he seemed cunning and almost bemused. The purple chameleon took a small step back, scales starting to vanish on instinct.

”What is going on here?” Came Kuroshi’s demand as the obsidian chameleon burst into the clearing, eyes furious. “Everyone in the village could hear your shouting, and besides that we are under attack! We need every ninja to—“

Suddenly Mugai let out a blood-curdling scream and lunged forward, everything moving so fast yet so sharp with detail that Kaito knew he would never forget anything about this moment. It would be imprinted in his mind forever—Mugai withdrawing a hidden kunai from within his shozoku, him lunging at his youngest brother with the weapon raised as Kaito for some reason couldn’t get his limbs to move an inch even though he was feeling almost dizzy with panic, Ketsu lunging forward to try to knock Mugai away…

And finally the yellow chameleon being jerked away by some invisible force and collapsing on the ground with a fresh wound in his back.

Kaito couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. The world had faded away and left him with only the sight of Ketsu’s wide, unseeing eyes as shock make his dying muscles tense up. Riku casually reappeared and yanked the blade away from the young chameleon’s body, shaking off some of the blood before holding it back up in a ready position. “Pity, I was hoping to finish you off first, Kuro, but it looks like your son was eager to cut the line.”

Kuroshi sniffed, eyes narrowing in realization. “Riku. So you are the one who set fire to my village and ruined the sacred ritual. I should’ve known.”

”Good to see you too, brother.” Riku smirked slightly. “It’s such a shame that your little puppet was killed—now you’re left with a weak late-hatcher and a bold ninja with a warrior spirit. The choice is clear.”

Kuroshi tensed up, gesturing to his brother’s blade, still dripping with blood. “A true ninja knows how to clean his own blade, Riku. A dirty weapon is a dishonor.”

Kaito stiffened. That was it? That was all his father could say? Kaito started forward but Riku raised his kunai. “Ah ah ah, easy there, little heir. Unless you want to join your kin.”

Get up. Kaito mentally pleaded as Ketsu's vibrant scales paled, chest no longer rising and falling with each breath. *A true ninja always gets up. That's what you always said, right? So get up.*

Get up.

Ketsu remained completely limp and still, Kaito's heart clenching in his chest. Mugai was likewise staring at his dead brother in shock, having expected this but reality hitting hard as death was no longer a vague idea but the grim aftermath of someone he had grown up with. Kaito's breath hitched and his vision grew blurry, grief mingling with shame as he couldn't hold back his emotions. He was sent crashing to the ground before he even knew what was happening, unable to resist Kuroshi's blow as he crumbled numbly. The obsidian chameleon glared at him, disgust clear in his expression. "Control yourself, Kaito. You are no longer a child, or have you forgotten?"

I'm sorry… Kaito thought, but for the life of him he couldn't get any words to form. Gaia, why was it so hard to regain his composure?

Never react.

Never react.

Never react.

Never—

Another strike from his father's whip-like tail snapped his head to the side, Kaito flinching back and curling up into a pathetic ball in a weak attempt to protect himself. Kuroshi hit him again, anger rising. "You are in the presence of an enemy, Kaito! You shame the entire clan with your emotions. Where is your honor? Where is your dignity? Ketsu is dead and there is nothing else to it."

"As I told you, Kuro." Riku commented as Kaito felt the tears escape, covering his head as he was kicked by his father. "Your sons are not fit to lead the great Shinobi Clan and you know it. Mugai is the only one with… *potential*."

"The only one foolish enough to be manipulated by you." Kuroshi replied coldly, and Mugai looked up with uncertain eyes. He was biting his tongue in an effort to keep stoic and calm as he lifted his chin.

"Kaito and… and Ketsu were always weak, Father." He stepped closer as Riku watched on, eyes dark and knowing. "I have been training harder than both of them combined."

"With Riku, I presume?" Kuroshi asked slowly, eyes narrowing. Kaito felt his chest clench in fear as Mugai hesitated before nodding.

"Yes, Father. And even if you disapprove, I am inevitably the heir now." Gaining confidence, he lifted his chin further to look at his father with bitter eyes. "I know the Trial was

interrupted by… unfortunate circumstances, but I am the only one of us capable of such a great responsibility. Look at Kaito! Do you really think *he* deserves the Clan over myself?“

Shut up shut up shut up… Kaito mentally pleaded, but of course his brother didn’t hear him and didn’t sense the building anger in his father. His voice raised as he adopted a more authoritative stance.

”As the new leader of this Clan I welcome Riku back in, since he was wrongfully banished.” Mugai’s eyes sharpened. “He helped train me into the warrior I always knew I could be, and look at the two *you* trained! You’re lucky if I don’t outcast *you*—“

Kuroshi moved before anyone could react, lunging forward and grabbing Mugai’s head with one hand and the base of his neck with the other. He quickly twisted, adding pressure as a sickening cracking rang out and Mugai let out a strangled gasp. Another whimper wracked Kaito’s body and he slapped a hand over his own mouth as Mugai collapsed next to Ketsu, twitching in pain and discomfort but unable to move as he was slowly strangled.

”Pity.” Riku glanced down at Mugai’s body. “Is that what you’ve resorted to, Kuro? Killing anyone who stands in your way?”

“I cannot let disrespect be tolerated. You know this.” Kuroshi’s eyes narrowed. “And you were the one who killed Ketsu out of cold blood.”

”*I* am not bound by the rules and customs of the Shinobi Clan.” Riku’s eyes turned to Kaito, who looked up at him warily. “However I know you are, and I also am well aware that this scrawny thing is your final heir. Which means that after his death the village will pass to me if you also die.”

After his death. Not if he died in battle, not if he died due to natural circumstances—just a grim certainty that he wouldn’t make it past today. Kaito felt a sharp, primal urge to survive cut through his grief as he mentally screamed at his own body to move. Kuroshi stiffened. “Kaito has shown weakness in the past, but he has a strong mind and will learn to be a good heir to the village.”

”Oh sure, just beat him into submission like your own father did.” Riku rolled his eyes.

”Don’t speak like that!” Kuroshi snapped, and Riku smirked.

”Oh, is the stoic leader of our clan finally breaking?” The dark brown chameleon’s scales glinted in exhilaration. “I can see all the bruises and cuts, and never missed an injury on Mugai when he came to train with me. You’ve become just as bad as Father and you know it, Kuro! I’m just putting your sons out of their misery.”

”If they cannot handle a little discipline then they are weak!” Kuroshi scowled.

”There is discipline, but there is also cruelty. Whatever happened to the Clan’s conduct of peace?” Riku snapped his fingers. “Oh wait—that was all a lie. Only a ruthless power play that feeds the leader’s ego. Not a bad situation if you’re the leader, but I’m the only one brave

enough to say it out loud. And I'll be on top once Kaito and yourself are out of the picture, so it's of no consequence to me."

"I won't let you murder my son!" Kuroshi growled, and Riku rolled his eyes.

"Oh, so now you suddenly care about this late-hatching runt because he's useful to you? Face it—you want someone weak who will *become* you, not succeed you." Riku scoffed.

"Riku…" Came Mugai's rasp, and the ninjas looked down to see a dazed, pained look in the dying chameleon's eyes. He couldn't quite move anymore but had adopted a primal, almost vulnerable expression as he came to terms with his nearing demise. "Riku… I…"

"Finish the job, Kaito." Kuroshi said in a low voice, and Kaito's mouth went dry. *What…?* "Did I stutter? Take that kunai you dropped and finish the Trial."

"Oh the stupid Trial!" Riku flung out his arms in exasperation. "Face it Kuro—he's the weakest of all of them! You just ruined your only hope at a decent heir, and now all you have is me."

"Kaito is capable of leading if he would only get out of his head and take action." Kuroshi glared at his youngest son. "Are you even listening to me? I told you finish the job, and that is a direct order from your leader. Your role is not to think upon the moral conflicts or the previous sentiments you may have had—you need only listen and obey. *I* am your conscience. *I* am your voice of reason. *I* am your thoughts. Do you understand me? So pick up your kunai. *Now!*"

Kaito flinched at his father's voice, shakily grabbing the kunai next to him and hesitating, feeling like he was an outsider in his own skin. His limbs were all tingling and trembling, feeling too weak to move even though his brain was commanding them to. Kuroshi stepped forward and Kaito instinctively flinched away, dropping the kunai again as he covered his head. "Kaito, you are not a child! Get up!"

"Such a fearless leader. The village is in good hands." Riku mocked, and shame began to pound in Kaito's head. What was he doing? His father told him to finish killing Mugai, and logically he knew that it was the proper punishment for such an act of treason. He was a ninja! A warrior! Someone who had been trained to fight and kill from birth. So why was this so hard? He curled up tighter as his father shouted something else trying to get himself to move. He peeked over to see his brother looking at him with pleading eyes, looking genuinely terrified for the first time in all their ten years. The bravado was gone now that he was helpless, and all that was left was a broken shell of a chameleon.

Mugai's mouth opened and closed but he was unable to get any words out, Kaito realizing after a few moments that he was trying to beg for mercy. From *him*. From the weakest brother he would always pick on for the thrill of his own ego. Ketsu was lying dead on the ground next to him and Kaito's eyes darted between the two brothers he could no longer recognize with a sinking sense of dread.

"Kaito, I will not ask again." Kuroshi told him firmly, and Kaito grimaced as he slowly unraveled himself, limbs feeling heavy as he picked up the kunai.

Never react.

He tediously got to his feet, the metal feeling slick in his sweaty palm.

Never react.

Kuroshi watched on, and Kaito could feel his eyes upon him as he approached Mugai, seeing the dread in his brother's face.

Never react.

He couldn't do it.

Never react.

But he had to.

Never react.

He needed to be strong.

Never react.

Strong for Yuki.

Never react.

Strong for his village.

Never react

Strong for everyone who now depended on him as their final hope against Riku.

Never. React.

But now? Looking down at the brother who had beaten him and humiliated him too many times to count now looking so helpless and pleading? Kaito just couldn't bring himself to hurt him.

Just like the failure his father always told him he was.

"Time's up." Riku commented before lunging forward with his still-wet kunai, Kaito diving out of the way with his mind numbing. Was this all really happening? Were those really his dead and dying brothers next to him, one of whom he had been ready to kill? Was the village he had grown up in really getting consumed by flames?

Who even *was* he anymore?

"Kaito, go evacuate the village!" Kuroshi snapped, tackling Riku away as he turned his scales invisible. "We will discuss your disobedience later—right now you need to step up and preserve what's left of the Clan."

Kaito was frozen for a few moments, but after his father shouted "*GO*!" he finally snapped out of his fog and turned on his tail, darting away towards the building flames.

He needed to be strong now.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, who knew you could pack so much trauma into one little chameleon? Hehe? Heh…

Just two more chapters for this arc! See ya in the next chapter! Thanks for reading! :D

Chapter 8: Nothing Left

Chapter Summary

> ”Yuki?” Kaito shouted as he hurried into the dojo, the sudden billow of smoke making him double over coughing. Tears filled his eyes and he desperately wiped them away, trying to go deeper into the room and search for survivors. “Mother? Anyone? Shout if you can hear me!”

Chapter Notes

> I’ve written so many of these chapters the past few days I’ll probably be posting them a lot lol XD But yay and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! Last chapter was kinda a doozy hehehehehehe but the next chapter will be the last of this arc! ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Yuki?” Kaito shouted as he hurried into the dojo, the sudden billow of smoke making him double over coughing. Tears filled his eyes and he desperately wiped them away, trying to go deeper into the room and search for survivors. “Mother? Anyone? Shout if you can hear me!”

There was only the cracking of failing wood and roaring of the fire, but Kaito still felt anxious. He’d already found a few of his fellow Clan members and showed them the way out of various structures but hadn’t seen everyone personally. Likely they had already escaped, but he knew that if he was mistaken he would never forgive himself.

He already didn’t know if he’d be able to look at his reflection without shame again after what had happened to Ketsu.

And now Mugai was likely going to die slowly or be killed off by their father.

Don’t think about that don’t think about that don’t think about that…

Upon reassuring himself that the dojo was clear he darted out, gasping in the cooler air outside that was still filled with smoke but noticeably better than the quality inside. Bracing himself, he forced his tired limbs to continue on into the next home he came across, lungs screaming in protest. He called out again, straining his ears for any sign of survivors and doing his best to keep his mind clear.

He could process everything later, but right now he needed to *act*.

”Kaito?” Came a faint voice, and Kaito’s chest squeezed as he recognized Yuki. He hurried further into the flames, following the sound of her voice.

”Yuki? Are you hurt?” He shouted. “Tell me where you are!”

”Is that the little heir I hear?” Replied an unfamiliar voice, and Kaito skidded to a stop when he rounded a corner to see Yuki standing in front of a young kunochi named Kira, a large unknown chameleon cornering them. He turned around, a scar replacing one eye while the other sharpened at the sight of Kaito. His mouth spread in a toothy grin as he turned around, forgetting about Yuki and the hatchling. “Riku will be pleased to see you!”

There were more of them? Just how many attackers were there? Steeling himself he lifted his chin and got into a fighting stance. “The building is going to come down! You need to leave!”

”Bold words, weren’t you supposed to be the weak one? Regardless you will be coming with us whether you want to or not.” The stranger replied, and Kaito felt an angry surge rise up. Hadn’t he been through enough today? What else did the world want from him? His brothers were dead, his uncle was trying to kill him, his father was going to punish him for his weakness, his village was going up in flames, and now on top of it all this chameleon was still worried about capturing him instead of the collapsing building they were in? Kaito’s patience was all but gone at this point, a headache pounding behind his eyes from everything he was trying to suppress.

”Yuki, take Kira and get out of here! I’ll distract—oof!” Kaito yelped as he older chameleon pounced, shoving Kaito to the ground before the ninja regained his bearing and got his legs around his attacker’s, twisting his hips and sending him to the ground as well. He vanished from sight and dodged a shuriken, flinching slightly as it hit the floor behind him. He snatched it up and flung it at the spot he guessed his attacker had moved to, hearing a cry of pain and glad he hit his target. He leapt out of the way as the stranger tried to retaliate, watching as Yuki hurried the hatchling out of the room with a sort of satisfaction, turning back to the stranger he was fighting.

”You’ve done it now, kid! Our resistance is everywhere! You can’t escape us!” The chameleon shouted, bright red scales flashing briefly before he turned himself invisible once more. Kaito stiffened as he heard a cracking sound, quickly leaping away again as a fiery beam came down. He hissed as the cinders seared his scales. The sound clearly alerted the stranger, who finally succeeded in grabbing his tail and pulling him back as Kaito screamed.

”Let go of me!” Kaito shouted, skin crawling as he felt his captor’s hands all over him, pinning him to the ground. His head was pressed into the ground as he squirmed, feeling a bony knee dig into his back and a sweaty hand wrap around his throat.

”You put up quite the fight, little one. But this all ends now—we’ve already won.” The stranger panted, out of breath from both the fight and the smoke polluting the air. “Our new clan should be all over the village now, and if you’re alone then it likely means that your brothers and father have already been taken care of. Your mother should be quite easy to track down as well and is no match for our new clan.”

“Get off of him!” Came Yuki’s shout, and Katio’s attacker was forced to dodge off of him as a kunai whizzed over the young heir’s head. Kaito coughed, trying to get more air to fill his lungs but only feeding them with smoke instead. Yuki’s eyes were blazing as she stood in front of him, a second kunai already in hand that she must’ve grabbed once her charge was safe.

”Out of my way, kunochi!” The stranger seethed. “That heir is *mine*!”

”Kaito, you need to run!” Yuki told him firmly, and Kaito looked up in surprised, limbs trembling as he tried to get up.

”I can…” Kaito broke down in a fit of coughing, angry at himself for his display of weakness. “I can help! A true ninja never—“

”I don’t care about any of that right now!” Yuki snapped, and Kaito flinched. She *never* snapped at him like that. “They’re after *you!* Get out of here!”

”I’m not leaving!” Kaito protested, finally getting up as Yuki tackled the other chameleon, tail thrashing behind her as he struggled to keep him on the ground. “I’m… I’m the heir now! I need to stay and help fight!”

”You can’t help anyone if you’re dead!” Yuki pleaded. “Reinforcements are probably on their way, and the entire clan is already split up from evacuation. The village itself is coming down! There’s nothing left to protect! So go! Get out of here!”

”But what about—“

”*Please*, Kaito! I can’t hold him down for much longer!” Yuki’s eyes met his own, and her face softened ever so slightly. “Don’t make me beg, Kai. We will all survive this one way or another, and the only way you make it out alive is if you run. Now please leave, even if only for my sake.”

“I can’t—“ Kaito began, but a sudden cracking make everyone stop struggling and look up. The beams supporting the home had finally been eaten away by the hungry fire, and Kaito’s stomach dropped when he realized that the building was coming down. He desperately lunged forward to try to reach Yuki but was too late, body erupting in agony as cinders began raining down like a hailstorm. Splintering remains of the ceiling came down and knocked him to the ground, terror and desperation mingling together as he scrambled to get up but couldn’t before more debris piled on top of him. Searing pain exploded from every part of his body as the fire burned his scales, a large chuck of the roof finally coming down on his head.

There was a crack of agonizing discomfort before the world went black.

”Arashi!” Riku called out, limping out of the forest with a bitter anger that Kuroshi had fled the scene. The coward knew the fight was almost over and had let some of his ninjas distract his brother while he escaped, still the rightful leader of the Shinobi Clan. Arashi came over, covered from head to tail in soot and blistering wounds. “Did you find Kaito? He fled here to the village and I need him dead.”

”Then look no further.” Arashi smirked, teeth smudged with black. “I was with him before the building came down. There’s no way anyone could’ve survived.”

”You survived, didn’t you?” Riku raised an eye ridge. “I need to know that he is dead. Where is your proof?”

”I only survived because I was able to dodge the beams and make it to the door in time. Both he and some kunochi he called Yuki perished in the fire.” Arashi turned and gestured grandly to the wall of flames before them. “Look at it! There’s nothing left! Now all there is to do is find the clan members and round them up as your own, beginning a new village elsewhere.”

”Forget it.” Riku angrily looked away. “Kuroshi escaped.”

”What? How?” Arashi’s eyes widened, and Riku turned on him angrily.

”Because he’s a coward, that’s why! All that talk about being a true ninja and he left me to fight his lackeys instead of staying so I could kill him off.” Riku frowned at the fire. “Still, I don’t like leaving a job unfinished. Once the fire dies down I want to see Kaito’s body for myself.”

”If there’s a body to find, we’ll find it.” Arashi looked back at the flames. “But even if the fire destroys all evidence, there is no way anyone could’ve survived that building collapsing on top of them. Kaito is dead.”

Bjorn the Lynx looked up in irritation at a sharp knocking coming from the door, his grandfather Oskar grumbling as he set down his newspaper. “Who in chaos is coming to visit in this weather? It’s a snowstorm out there!”

”Maybe they’ll just go away?” Bjorn suggested, too comfy with his blanket and cocoa to want to get up. Wayward tourists weren’t uncommon in Winterburg, but still he had hoped that the thrashing storm outside would keep them away if only for the night. The knocking persisted and he sighed. “Fine I’ll get it. Hold your horses out there! I’m coming!”

”Nosy tourists.” Grumbled Oskar behind him as Bjorn opened the door, startling slightly as he saw a trembling chameleon covered in burns collapsed on his doorstep, cradling something against her chest.

”Great Gaia, lady! What happened to you?” Bjorn yelped. “How in chaos did you get burned all the way out here?”

”*Tasukete kudasai.*” (“Please help me.”) She mumbled, voice raspy and choked up. She opened her arms slightly to reveal a younger chameleon in her arms. “*Kare no mendō o mite.*” (“Take care of him.”)

“Uhhhh Oskar?” Bjorn called as she flinched and looked behind her. “A little help over here?”

His grandfather scowled from his comfy spot on the armchair. ”Who is it? Can’t they wait?”

”Not really, no.” Bjorn bent down to scoop up the child from her arms as she shakily tried to hand him to him, mind reeling. “Sorry lady, I can’t understand you. Just stay here and let me call you an ambulance or something—“

”*Kare no mendō o mite.*” (“Take care of him.”) She repeated, looking behind her worriedly. “*Moshi tsuite kitara ikanai to. Dōka kare o tasukete kudasai.*” (“They might’ve followed me so I have to go. Please help him.”)

”Sorry, I’m still lost. Just stay here and—what the?!” Bjorn yelped as she suddenly vanished from sight, leaving him staring at the winter storm with only the child in his arms. He looked down in shock, eyeing the burns and injuries in bewilderment. “Where in chaos did you come from??”

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, poor Kai! But at least he made it out alive… even though both Kuroshi and Riku also survived… hopefully he’ll have better luck in Winterburg!

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! I’ll try to get it out on good ol’ Chaotix Tuesday lol ^^

Chapter 9: Kid?

Chapter Summary

> Kaito groaned slightly as he stirred, mind slowly coming to consciousness despite his desire to stay asleep. To be honest, slumbering forever didn't sound too bad at this point…
>
> *The pain of a cold kunai piercing the side of his neck.*
>
> *The sound of Ketsu's ragged, final breaths.*

Chapter Notes

> Happy Chaotix Tuesday, everyone! And welcome to a new chapter! :D
>
> I hope you enjoy! As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito groaned slightly as he stirred, mind slowly coming to consciousness despite his desire to stay asleep. To be honest, slumbering forever didn't sound too bad at this point…

The pain of a cold kunai piercing the side of his neck.

The sound of Ketsu's ragged, final breaths.

The sight of Mugai begging for mercy from him.

The humiliation of being held down by someone much larger than himself.

The burning of the cinders.

The faint recollection of someone scooping him up when he was in too much agony to think straight…

Kaito gasped and sat up straight, crying out in pain as his various injuries screamed in protest. He flinched hard, trying to calm his breathing as it seemed that every movement somehow made everything worse. Where even was he? It was warm, but a strange warm. Like a fleeting heat that masked the cold outside, but it was spring! The weather was beautiful this time of year in the Shinobi village, and where else could he be?

”Hey kid, you awake?” Came a concerned voice, and Kaito nearly jumped out of his skin, trying to jump into a defensive stance but only succeeding in tangling in his blanket and falling off whatever cot he was on with a painful thump. He hissed and squeezed his eyes shut against the feeling.

“Oh geez! Take it easy, bud! You need to rest until the ambulance can make it through the storm to get here.” He pleaded, and Kaito peeked open an eye to see a tall lynx mobian staring down at him in concern.

“*Anata wa dare desu ka?*” (“Who are you?”) He demanded, not quite registering that these mobians were speaking a different language than he was used to in his panic. “*Naze koko ni iru no ka?*“ (“Why are you here?”)

“Uhhh… did ya get any of that?” The lynx asked his companion, who shrugged. “Alright, um… we are *friendly*, we no hurt *you*…”

”You sound like an idiot.” His friend sniffed. “Talking like that won’t help, Bjorn!“

“Well do you have any bright ideas then, Oskar? Or are you just going to sit there being all grumpy and such?” The first lynx—Bjorn, presumably—snapped back, and the two of them began to bicker as Kaito watched them carefully. It was becoming adamantly clear in his foggy mind that he was no longer in his village, which lined up with his memories of it all being burned to the ground and consuming himself in the fire as well.

So it wasn’t just a nightmare.

Then how did he get here?

”So you speak English?” Kaito asked slowly, doing his best to recall his lessons with Yuki, and they both stopped to look at him in bewilderment.

”Yeah, if ya don’t mind.” Bjorn shifted his weight uncomfortably. Kaito took a deep breath, the various slang and grammatically incorrect sentences making them more difficult to understand as he strove to translate.

”My apologies, our differential languages had not occurred to me. I am fluent in English as well, so we should be capable of conversing efficiently.” He replied formally, quickly turning his scales invisible and hearing his companions startle.

”Hey uh, yeah about that disappearing act you’ve got going on there.” Bjorn tilted his head. “Is that just something you can do on command? And regardless it would be best if the paramedics could *see* you instead of just blindly guessing your injuries off of my memory, which admittedly isn’t the sharpest tack in the box.”

”You can say that again.” Oskar grumbled, and Kaito stiffened.

”It… is preferable for my corporeal image to remain unrecognized.” He finally said calmly, and Bjorn scoffed.

”Geez, so many big book words. So you’ve got a big vocabulary *and* and turn yourself invisible? Where did ya even spawn from?! You some sort of spy or something?” He wriggled his eyebrows with a slight smirk. “Or an *espionager*, as you’d probably say?”

”*That* is not a word.” Called Oskar from the corner of the room, and Bjorn scowled.

”Yeah, well what’s the word for someone who espionages? That means spy, right? He’s not the only one who knows big words!” He frowned. “Really not an espionager? Is it an espio then? Or an espion? Or…”

”Espionage is an art—not a profession such as a builder or a doctor.” Oskar sighed. “The singular form would simply be a spy.”

”Well that’s no fun. Espio sounds cooler.” Bjorn muttered before turning back to Kaito. “What’s your real name, anyway?”

Kaito flinched, grimacing slightly at the memories those two syllables brought back. It was a name shouted by his father and called by his brothers and taunted by the attackers… and who knew who these new mobians were? He needed to be careful with who he talked to and what he revealed until he could get his bearings.

”…I have no name.” Kaito told him quietly, and Bjorn hesitated slightly as he was caught off guard before shrugging.

”Fine. Then we can use mine for now.” He crossed his arms. “So are you hungry? *Espio*?”

Kaito blinked. The name… wasn’t terrible. For now at least. It sure beat being called a ‘kid’ before like he was anything less than the mature ten-year-old he was. “Hunger is of the utmost irrelevance at the moment. For now I would very much like to inquire as to how I came to be here.”

”You sure English isn’t your first language? Keep talking like that and I’ll be the one who needs translating.” Bjorn grumbled. “But some lady chameleon dropped you off here before she disappeared and we haven’t seen her since. She was really banged up though—wish we could’ve gotten her to a hospital.”

Could that have been Yuki? Kaito’s stomach twisted as Bjorn continued. “She was sayin’ something in another language but I couldn’t understand her.”

”Do you recall what she said so I can translate?” Kaito asked hopefully, but Bjorn shrugged.

”Sorry, kid. I can’t really remember everything and besides that I doubt I could get my tongue to do what it’s supposed to do.” Bjorn apologized, and Kaito grimaced.

”Espio is fine.” He reminded, hating the condescending sound ‘kid’ had even though it was likely meant to be comforting. Bjorn chuckled slightly.

”Espio it is then. You can keep it if ya want—it really suits you.” He winked before straightening. “Hey Oskar! Any news on that ambulance?”

”They haven’t called since you talked to them.” Oskar commented back. “But hopefully the storm will clear soon.”

”Ambulance?” Kaito frowned. “I’m unfamiliar with that word. Would you please provide me with a definition?”

”It just means that some kind mobians are going to come and help you feel better.” Bjorn told him. “They’re going to let you ride in this really cool vehicle with lights and stuff and then probably figure out how to get you to a safe guardian, whether that be your parents or someone else.”

”Why would I need a guardian?” Kaito frowned, guard raising at the mobian’s words. Someone was going to come take him away? How would they even find his parents?

Well, Riku had.

Kaito shivered.

”Why would you—because you’re a *kid*, that’s why!” Bjorn exclaimed. “Was that lady we saw your mother? Or do you know where your parents are?”

”To answer your first inquiry, no.” Kaito told him. “And as for the second, I do not see how that information is relevant to you.”

Bjorn crossed his arms. “Well when a random kid is dropped off on my doorstep looking like he came straight from a volcano in the dead of winter then I’m not going to just let it go. Seriously, where did ya even get that beat up? There’s cuts and bruises all over you, not to mention the burns!” The lynx frowned. “Or that’s what I remember. Seriously, you can turn visible again. I already saw you.”

”You have already informed me of your less-than-ideal memory, so I have to conclude that you do not remember what I look like perfectly as to give an overly accurate description.” Kaito replied, and Oskar barked out a laugh.

”He’s got ya there, Bjorn!” He chortled. “Sharp kid.”

”I am not a kid.” Kaito clenched his jaw.

”Stubborn kid, too.” Oskar shrugged.

Kaito let out a huff but ignored him. “I appreciate your brief hospitality, but I will not be waiting around for some unknown Mobians to take me away—especially not back to where I came from.”

”Which is…?” Bjorn’s brow creased in concern. “Look, if you’re in a bad situation we can help you out. Honest.”

”I am not in need of assistance.” Kaito frowned and tentatively stepped off the cot. He winced slightly as his muscles ached and clenched up in protest but tried to shake off the

sensation, taking a few tentative steps. It wasn't easy, but he could walk and that was all that mattered. It took Bjorn a few moments to realize that he was no longer still.

"Woah—hey! Kid…"

"Espio." Kaito corrected firmly.

"Fine, *Espio* you gotta rest! You looked like you were seriously injured when ya got here!" Bjorn pleaded, holding out his arms awkwardly and trying to feel around for the chameleon. Kaito easily dodged his hands, rolling his eyes at the weak attempt to locate him. "Come on, I wasn't tryin' to scare you off. We're just trying to help you!"

"As aforementioned, I am in no need of your 'help'." Kaito insisted again. What was it with these people? *No one* in their right mind would ever help him without wanting something in return. And why would *he* shame himself by allowing strangers to aid him when he was perfectly capable of everything himself? He knew how to treat his wounds and knew which ones would heal on their own, so they had nothing to worry about.

"Well I'm not gonna let a kid go out on his own in the middle of a snowstorm." Bjorn crossed his arms, and Kaito hesitated. It was easy to forget that he was a cold-blooded mobian, and back where he used to live it hadn't snowed often so he never had to worry about it. But how would his already-weak body react to the freezing temperatures outside?

"Where is my shozoku?" He asked, looking around for his garment. Bjorn sighed.

"Is that the fancy name for that thing you were wearing earlier? It was full of tears and almost burned beyond recognition. I honestly thought it was just a ratty blanket to keep you warm." Bjorn hesitated at the silence that followed. "Uh… sorry I guess I should've thought about any sentimental purposes. I mean, I've got plenty of stuff you can borrow to keep warm! It'll all be a bit big on you, but at least you could—"

"I can uphold a certain appreciation for your offer, but unfortunately I will have to decline." Kaito muttered, averting his eyes. He knew that any clothing this lynx would let him borrow wouldn't disappear with him, and besides that he knew that his father would be *livid* that he had lost his shozoku…

Wait, was Kuroshi even still alive? Riku had been trying to kill him after all, and then there was his village burning up which might've killed his mother as well, his brothers were already dead, Yuki had left him here while apparently injured and not prepared for the cold…

Was he the only one left?

The thought hit him hard, and he stumbled back as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stop the onslaught of emotion threatening to put him to shame. A small whimper escaped him before he realized enough to stifle it, Bjorn's expression immediately softening as he kneeled down, searching blindly in the direction of the sound. "Hey… Es? You there bud? I'm sorry about your cloak thingy…"

”It’s not about that!” Kaito turned away, digging at his eyes. This was absolutely pathetic! But the emotions he’d been suppressing in order to survive were now overflowing, all swarming together in a deafening cacophony.

”It’s not?” Bjorn asked softly. “Then is it about something else? Maybe your parents…”

”*Don’t talk about them!*” Kaito snapped, and Bjorn held up his hands in a calming gesture.

”Okay, I won’t.” He told him. “Honestly I just want to help. If you don’t want my direct help, then at least tell me what I can do to help you help yourself. You’re not alone in this, okay? I know lots of mobians who’d be willing to offer you support or shelter or whatever you need.”

Kaito hesitated, Bjorn’s words striking a tender chord inside of him. He sounded so… compassionate. Empathy of any kind was something scarcely even *mentioned* in the Clan, much less practiced. But then again Riku had lured Mugai in that same way and look where it landed him! However his father’s cruelty had also pushed his followers and kin away, so what was right? Society seemed like a twisted web where every decision only led to the same center of primal instincts. There was no moral high ground but only… beings.

Beings who were inherently selfish, cruel and just trying to survive a heartless world that showed no mercy no matter who you were or where you were born.

Just a cold reality where the strong survived in misery and the weak died in shame.

”My apologies for causing you to worry.” Kaito said formally, using every ounce of his self control to help his voice steady. “I can assure you that it was unintentional and entirely unnecessary. It will not happen again.”

Bjorn’s face fell. He looked in Kaito’s direction for a long moment before sighing. “Sure, Es. Whatever you say.”

Kaito crept through the quiet cabin, blending comfortably into the darkness as he made his way towards the door. Oskar said he thought the ‘ambulance’ should be here in the morning, and Bjorn had hinted that he’d let some friends know the chameleon was here so they could help.

What was it with these mobians and their obsession with helping others?

It made Kaito’s skin crawl.

He hesitated at the sound of Oskar’s snore, glancing over at his two hosts who were sleeping by the fire so he wouldn’t be alone. There was something else besides a wary discomfort when they had insisted on trying to help him—something softer and almost tender. He couldn’t quite understand the feeling and didn’t know what to think about it. After all, he’d spent his entire life learning how to fend for himself, so why would he ever find comfort in someone taking care of *him* instead? And even though there was embarrassment at being treated like some child, there was also a longing spark in the deepest parts of his mind that yearned to be held.

To have someone tell him that he was just enough as he was.

That everything was going to be okay.

That they would never leave him for anything.

Kaito shuddered and shook off those thoughts, turning away from Bjorn and Oskar's sleeping forms. He couldn't spend time wishing for something he would never have—it only clouded his mind with a desperate frustration. He was more than capable of handling himself, and for the first time he was truly free from his Clan's expectations.

There was no way in Mobius that he would allow himself to be trapped like that again.

Maybe they were dead, or maybe they thought he was dead, but it didn't even matter anymore.

He had failed his family and only purpose in life.

There was nothing left to go back to, and he knew that he could never look his father in the eyes again after what happened anyway.

Kaito was *gone*.

So with a sharp breath, he carefully opened the door and slipped out, leaving the cabin as still and silent as if he'd never even been there in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, that concludes the first arc of this story! Next chapter will be a bit of a time skip, but we might also see some new characters… perhaps some *familiar* characters… :3

Poor Kaito… hopefully he can learn to accept help before it's too late! After all, society isn't exactly built around allowing a kid on his own to remain alone…

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 10: Arc 2: A Ghost in Seaside City

Chapter Summary

> *Seven months later…*
>
> Vector the Crocodile leaned back in his chair, groaning at the large heap (he had given up trying to stay organized halfway through) of bills that lay haphazardly on his desk. Well this was just perfect, wasn't it? Now he wasn't just a wannabe detective, but he was a detective who was far behind on his rent and too stubborn to admit to his folks that his big dreams of becoming a hotshot private investigator were taking a bit longer than he had hoped.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to Arc 2! Let's see what our lil guy has been up to since Bjorn's cabin… I hope you all enjoy! :DDD
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and thank you all so much for all your support so far <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seven months later…

Vector the Crocodile leaned back in his chair, groaning at the large heap (he had given up trying to stay organized halfway through) of bills that lay haphazardly on his desk. Well this was just perfect, wasn't it? Now he wasn't just a wannabe detective, but he was a detective who was far behind on his rent and too stubborn to admit to his folks that his big dreams of becoming a hotshot private investigator were taking a bit longer than he had hoped.

He had… found some raccoon lady's keys, so that was something, right? It barely paid anything, but he was clearly desperate and needed some experience. He doubted any of the other elderly Mobians at her bingo would serve as good referrals, but he supposed anything was better than nothing. After all he advertised himself as never turning down any work that pays, and although it was vague it was also true.

Vector scowled at the stupidly tiny print marching across all of the papers, all formal proclamations of the common knowledge that he was broke. 'Final warning' this and 'last chance' that… it was all getting old. He was already living off of frozen pizzas and canned goods—what more did they want from him?

”Alright Vector, focus.” The crocodile took a deep breath. “You can go without any cable for a bit… the neighbors never read their papers anyway so you can get the latest news from those. A little dumpster dive never hurt anyone. Lights would be a bother… but it could also be some good practice! A detective needs to be able to navigate any terrain… and you could maybe sell some more furniture…”

Vector frowned doubtfully at the barren room. Really all it had was the desk, chair and old fashioned record player he couldn’t part with, and he knew that the second floor of the narrow building wasn’t much better. There was a mattress without a bed frame in one room and a couple odds and ends he’d brought from home in the others but nothing much else. But he was the only one staying here, so what was the harm in it? It was almost cozy in a sense—just a gritty detective living life solo and trying to navigate life and cases like the tough gumshoe he was. He lived by his own rules and came and went as he pleased, not tied down to anyone and willing to take on anything that came his way.

The phone rang and Vector nearly jumped out of his skin, staring at the device as if it had been personally handed to him by an angel as an answer to his prayers before pouncing on it and taking a deep breath to compose his voice. “Ahem—you’ve reached Vector the Crocodile, Private Investigator at the Chaotix Detective Agency. What can I do for you?”

”Hello Mr. Vector, this is Hank the Mountain Goat.” Came the voice from the other end, and Vector straightened. Starting out with a formal greeting? The slight waver of uncertainty in his voice? This was sounding less like a scam call and more like an actual case! Vector could’ve kissed the phone in relief as Hank continued. “Sorry to call like this, and it might sound a bit crazy.”

”Well I can assure you that there’s no job too big and no gig too small!” Vector struggled to keep himself from sounding overly-eager. “What can I help you with?”

”It’s not really for me, but my grandmother Meredith. She uh…” Hank hesitated before sighing. “Okay just bear with me here, but she’s certain she’s being haunted.”

Vector blinked. “Um… excuse me?”

”She believes there’s a friendly ghost that comes by every day, and she even sets out food for it.” He explained, and Vector’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Now there’s no doubt that *someone* is taking her food, but I don’t think it’s what she believes. Maybe a rowdy teenager looking for free food or some thief taking advantage of her kindness, but she’s absolutely adamant and won’t call the police. She even goes into specifics on how the ghost likes the nighttime best and has specific food tastes and stuff like that. I thought maybe you could just catch whoever it is taking her food and save her the trouble of making all these random dishes for some freeloader.”

”Well Mr. Hank, I can assure you that I’ll do everything in my power to catch this mystery thief and prove that your grandmother isn’t haunted.” Vector’s tail thrashed happily behind him as adrenaline flooded his system. “Consider this detective on the case!” He hesitated slightly, adding, “Also, for research purposes, how did ya hear of me?”

”My grandmother attends a bingo group and heard that you helped her friend find her keys or something like that. She was telling me the story and I thought it was worth a shot.” Hank told him. “Besides, you were the cheapest P.I. I could find.”

”Wow, full circle.” Vector muttered.

”What was that?” Hank asked.

”Nothing! See ya tonight!” Vector replied.

”That boy just doesn’t get it.” Meredith the Mountain Goat muttered, overhearing the conversation Hank had with some gumshoe as she was bringing some dried seaweed to her window. “Not all ghosts are mean and scary. Isn’t that right, my little friend?”

She glanced out at the night, looking around before sighing and setting her offering down on the open windowsill. “I know you like to keep to yourself, so here you go. I brought your favorite.” She chuckled, turning away and beginning to hobble back to her living room.

She heard a soft swish and smiled, not even having to turn around to know that the seaweed was gone.

As he made his way through the back forest with his prize, Espio remained alert for any traces of him being followed. He had heard that grandson inside talking to someone on the phone about him and it made him uneasy, even though he was confident in his ability to remain unseen.

After all, he’d already been hiding out in Seaside City for about six months. What could possibly happen now?

Espio hesitated, looking around carefully before quickly scaling a tree and sitting on a branch with his back to the trunk, taking a bite of his seaweed. When he had left that cabin in Winterburg his only goal had been to find somewhere warmer to stay, body shutting down from the hefty amounts of snow and no proper gear. He’d never realized just how *big* the world was until he was no longer an heir but a small insignificance roaming around aimlessly, feeling very small as he invisibly walked the crowds. But that was the way of the ninja—unseen, and unheard. The name Bjorn had given him really stuck, offering him a new identity in his mind that helped block out the trauma. He just needed to keep moving forward, and he couldn’t do that if he was stuck in the past.

So he’d stopped thinking about all of it.

About everything he’d lost.

About his dead brothers.

About his murderous uncle.

About his disappointed father.

About how Yuki likely died in the storm.

About the chance that someone had followed him…

Espio hissed and grabbed his head, squeezing his eyes shut. How stupid *was* he? He couldn't think of thinking about any of that! He repeated to his brain to shut the heck up, practicing breathing exercises until his mind cleared and he opened his weary eyes. He gripped the branch he was on, the rough bark offering a grounding sensation for him to focus on. The world wasn't kind to someone like him on his own, and he'd quickly realized that his own perception of maturity was vastly different from everyone else in Mobius.

Apparently it was a common agreement that eighteen years of age marked the beginning of adulthood.

Such a ridiculous number.

He also couldn't allow himself to be seen, since people were always worried and obsessed over the 'scrawny kid on his own' instead of minding their own business and treating him fairly. Was it so hard for them to accept that he was simply trying to get along in the world? He'd realized through observation that most things were obtained through the trading of currency for whatever it was you desired, but when he had collected enough rings from wishing fountains or the side of the streets people *still* wouldn't take them! It was always some nosy question asking about his parents or why he wasn't at 'school', which was apparently a place that mobians his age would go to learn.

The world was so strange out here.

No wonder he was never allowed to leave the village.

He'd gotten around though, traveling from city to city and trying to figure things out as he went. Apparently chameleons weren't very common, and by default it meant that most people were unaware of their invisibility techniques. People would just sell clothing made from disappearing material without even realizing it, and Espio had only stumbled upon that fact when he'd been searching for shoes to help his aching feet and watched a large pair of boots disappear with his hand.

He'd promptly taken them with him.

Along with a pair of gloves, since he had to climb quite often to evade discovery.

Eventually he'd come across Seaside City, immediately feeling at home in the pleasant climate and gorgeous views. Many people often came as tourists to visit the beach, and that also meant plenty of food thrown away carelessly for him to find and consume. Not the healthiest stuff in the world, and still he'd lost plenty of weight, but it was something. Lots of city dwellers here also kept their windows open for the calming ocean breeze, offering him a quick grab if anything was set on the sill to cool. Most Mobians didn't think much of it, often blaming non-sapient raccoons or flickies.

But Meredith had been different.

The elderly mountain goat insisted he was a ghost of some sort, having witnessed her baked goods raise unnaturally into the air more than once. Those moments had been careless mistakes on his part, usually on days when he was tired or weak from hunger, but as long as it kept her on the wrong trail then he couldn't see how it was something to waste concern on. Even if she told someone, who would believe her? Her own grandson thought she was crazy! After he had voiced his concerns Espio had tried to space out his thefts, hoping no one else would make the connections and realize it wasn't just a pest problem, but Meredith's cooking and baked goods were too delicious to pass up. Besides, as long as no one recognized him and knew the dishonor he was bringing upon himself them he supposed there was no harm done.

So someone was going to come try and find him? Some 'private investigator' thought they could keep up with a trained ninja?

Well they were gravely mistaken.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, it looks like Es has found a new home and a new name! AND VECTOR ENTERS THE PLOT!! But it's only a matter of time for our lil chameleon… hehe…

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 11: The Blink of an Eye

Chapter Summary

> ”Detective Vector. Glad you’re here.” Hank answered the door. “My grandmother’s inside making rice cakes.”
>
> Vector frowned. “Rice cakes? That’s… oddly specific.”
>
> Hank sighed. “She’s certain that the ‘ghost’ loves her seaweed and rice cakes the best. Said it doesn’t often take anything with dairy in it, or if it does then it takes longer to.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! :D Let’s see how Vector’s investigation goes…
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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> Hank sighed. “She’s certain that the ‘ghost’ loves her seaweed and rice cakes the best. Said it doesn’t often take anything with dairy in it, or if it does then it takes longer to.”
>
> ”I’m not crazy, Hank!” An elderly voice called out, presumably Meredith. “You can tell that P.I. to turn his tail right back around and leave me in peace! My little friend doesn’t like to be watched, and that’s their right!”
>
> ”*Please* help me out here.” Hank pleaded, lowering his voice. “She’s too sweet for her own good and I don’t like the thought of someone taking advantage of her like this.”
>
> ”I told ya to get off my porch, you young whipper-snapper!” Meredith shouted.
>
> ”Yeah, she seems really… sweet.” Vector commented doubtfully, and Hank chuckled weakly.
>
> ”Maybe compassionate is a better word. And at times just passionate.” Hank sighed. “She’s really fiery for her age, but if she makes up her mind to help someone then there’s no chance

of swaying her."

"Um… I don't mean to be disrespectful, Ma'am!" Vector called out, tentatively stepping inside. "I'm just here to make sure that everything's… erm… safe around here…"

"Oh stuff it, alligator!" Meredith snapped, hobbling into sight as Vector gulped. "You're just here to bother my ghost friend and everyone knows it!"

"I'm actually a crocodile, Ma'am…" Vector corrected, struggling to hide his vexation.

"Hmph. Calls himself an investigator and isn't even a gator. That's just false advertising." She muttered, and Vector grimaced. Of course the two species looked *sort of* similar (Vector personally couldn't see the resemblance, but he supposed that identical twins often faced the same dilemma when they could determine seemingly obvious differences that were almost imperceptible to the untrained eye) but it was still a strong pet peeve of his to be mistaken for an alligator. A crocodile was a part of identity—it's who he *was*. Of course perhaps some people couldn't understand the vexation they caused with the accidental slip-ups, and logically he knew that it wasn't entirely their fault and that mistakes happened, but it still irked him. Meredith's eyes narrowed. "Now you listen here, Mr. Crocodile. My ghost doesn't like any sort of social interaction or speculation. It's a shy little fellow and I want it to feel safe around here, you got that? So get off my property!"

"It's *our* property…" Hank reminded, and she let out a huff.

"All ridiculous legal details, pish posh." She muttered angrily to herself as she went to retrieve a rice cake. "But I'm tellin' ya—the ghost won't take anything if it's bein' watched."

"A reasonable consideration, Ma'am, but I can assure you that it won't even know I'm here!" Vector piped up, trying to stay positive, but she grabbed the plate and looked at him as if he were the biggest idiot she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Oh it *knows*." She smirked slightly as she set the plate gently on her windowsill. "It *always* knows."

"With all due respect, I pride myself in being well versed with the art of *stealth*." She stepped away from the window, and his eyes followed her despite the mischievous look she wore. "I'm a detective, after all! A certified gumshoe. Believe me when I say that no one can sneak up on a trained private eye!"

"Are you sure about that?" She asked, smirk widening. Vector sighed and gestured emphatically to the window.

"Sure I'm sure! That ghost will never—WHAT IN CHAOS where did it go?!" The crocodile yelped when he looked back to the sill to see the rice cake gone, the space empty as if nothing had been there in the first place. He rushed over and stuck his head out of the opening, looking left and right into the empty forest. "But I don't… I didn't hear… this doesn't make any sense…"

"I tried to warn ya." Meredith shrugged. "It's a sneaky little fellow."

”But… wait…” Vector pointed an accusing finger, forgetting his etiquette briefly. “You made me look away!”

”My ghost was probably hungry. You were only delaying it’s dinner.” Meredith told him.

”And you?! You didn’t see anything?” Vector asked Hank, who sighed.

”You don’t think I’ve tried to just watch the food before?” The mountain goat looked bitterly to the window. “It’s always the second I blink or the moment I have to scratch an itch. I’ve given up trying to catch it at this point.”

Vector took a sharp breath, briefly closing his eyes to think. So this would be a bit harder than he thought, but what was a detective story without an unexpected twist? He could handle this no problem, right?

Of course right.

”Okay, that’s fine.” Vector turned his attention back to Meredith. “Maybe let’s start with why you think it’s so hungry?”

She shrugged. “It always takes my food faster than I can turn around. It used to be just here and there until I started setting some aside specifically for it to have, and setting a schedule. Now it knows when I make stuff for it and is ready.”

Vector felt a sharp pang in his chest. So whoever it was might actually need the help? It… did put things in a different perspective, but it didn’t excuse this behavior. There were other options for help such as food banks or perhaps even family and friends—this stranger didn’t have to make a poor old woman question her own sanity. She should at least know who it was she was helping!

Perhaps the thief was too proud to reach out for help.

”Okay, new plan: you put another rice cake out. I’m going to go outside and watch.” Vector straightened. “It might be able to snag the food, but there’s no way it can get away from me that easily. Everything makes some sort of sound!”

”Except for ghosts.” Meredith pointed out.

Vector grimaced. “We’ll see about that. I’m headed out.”

Espio smirked slightly to himself as he watched the detective stick his head out the window, pathetically trying to spot him when he was already safe back in his tree. He’d been in plain sight—standing invisibly right in front of the rice cake until the moment Vector turned aside. He then timed it with Hank’s blinking and snatched the food off the sill, silently making off with his prize.

It was too easy.

Now Meredith was setting out a second rice cake, Vector promising to go outside and catch him. He already had the first one, but what harm was there in a little challenge?

This would be fun.

Vector stared at the sill, eyes watering as he kept them open and on the rice cake. What was taking so long? Had the ghost—no, not a ghost, he reminded himself—gotten full and left them alone? But being a detective meant that you had to have grit, so the crocodile persisted.

His eyes *were* getting dry though, and painfully so. They had begun to water which helped a bit, but overall he still longed to blink. What if the thief took the cake in that moment though? It seemed impossible that anyone could move that fast, but still.

Great Gaia, how long am I going to have to wait? Vector thought to himself as his eyes burned, and after a few moments he finally allowed himself to quickly blink and open them again.

The rice cake was gone.

”For the love of—!” Vector scowled, looking left and right around the silent forest before stomping over and looking for any clues. How in the world was this even possible? In one blink, how could anyone come over, snatch a rice cake, and then disappear without any sound or trace? Not to mention that whoever it was must’ve been watching Vector closely, but when the crocodile looked around he could see no one. It was really starting to get on his nerves—how could he call himself a gumshoe when he couldn’t even catch someone stealing rice cakes from a little old lady?

”I told ya.” Came Meredith’s call, and Vector sighed.

”Think, Vector!” He grumbled under his breath, looking back out at the trees. “It’s obviously not a ghost. Well, less obvious now but still there has to be a reasonable explanation. Whoever this is has to be smart as a whip and real sneaky—maybe a smaller Mobian? Or someone with really long arms who could snatch the cake away quickly? Or… or maybe even a bird? Oh this is getting me nowhere.” Vector squinted at the ground. “If it’s a bird it would’ve left no footprints, but I would’ve heard the wings. Unless it was an owl… I think they have silent wings or something like that… but then again birds aren’t the only Mobians who can fly… in fact some birds *can’t*… just check for footprints!”

The crocodile kneeled down, sharp eyes scanning the mulch that bordered the forest and littered the spot under the windowsill. Come to think of it, this was the perfect house to target for someone trying to remain unseen. It was on the edge of Seaside City so it still had a pleasant climate but also had a forest around back so anyone could easily hide. However trees *would* make it harder for any flying creature…

There! Vector almost shouted for joy as he finally noticed a small patch of leaves brushed away. To anyone else it might look like a natural occurrence from a slight breeze or small critter (and maybe to anyone *sane* as well), but at this point Vector was desperate and would

take anything he could get. He gently brushed some of the mulch to the side to see light indentations in the moist forest floor. Were those… ridges? Of a boot, perhaps?

Vector frowned and compared the size to his own shoe. It was considerably smaller, but then again that didn't help him a whole lot since mobians came in all shapes and sizes.

It did tell him that it had feet *for* in boots, though.

And regardless, it had given him his first clue.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like our crocodile got his first clue! Hopefully he can figure out who this 'ghost' is soon… :3

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 12: A Pathetic Display

Chapter Summary

Vector walked around to the back of Meredith's house the next day, feeling renewed as he carried a large bag with him. He looked around warily, knowing that he had about an hour until it was technically time for the mountain goat to set out a meal for her ghost.

The first thing he did was set an invisible ink pad he'd gotten at the craft store (technically made for kids, but a true detective took what he could get) down at the base of the window, partially covering it with leaves and nodding to himself. A black light was hidden in the pocket of his long brown coat (okay he might've gotten a bit carried away when he saw a costume store next to the craft store, he could own that one, but a new outfit got his creative juices flowing), and when he stepped back he couldn't even see the pad peeking through the leaves. It would only be revealed if the mulch was dragged away, such as by a footstep.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Let's see how Vector's investigation plays out… I hope you enjoy! :D

Also thank you all so much for 50 kudos and all your kind comments so far!! I love reading your thoughts and reactions and am so happy you're enjoying the story! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He then set up a rope with a noose on one end, leading the rest of the coil around to tie it to a branch. He loosely scattered leaves across it while making sure it was still visible, nodding to

himself and feeling quite proud of his plan.

The final thing he did was set up a recording device inside a bush, grateful for his tough scales as he maneuvered the lens to peek through an opening in the brambles and face the window. He'd made sure to give it a full battery and made certain to turn it on before stepping back and facing it. "Twenty-four hour use, huh? Let's see if that cheap camera store had it right." He muttered before clearing his throat. "This is Vector the Crocodile, working day two of the Case of the Seaside City Ghost. I have come prepared this time—collecting tools in accordance with what I've induced about this 'ghost' after my last-night observations…"

"Why are ya talkin' so weird?" Meredith shouted from her house, and Vector grimaced in irritation.

"I'm not talking weird!" He protested. "Just… erm… making sure that I log everything properly!" He heard her huff and waited for her to hobble away, turning to give the camera a subtle wink. "More about the case later."

Espio hurried through the trees, urged on by his stomach rumbling. A true ninja was very intuitive when it came to the cycles of the day and the fluctuations of nature, helping him keep track of time without the use of little wrist bands that he's seen a lot of mobians use. Perhaps theirs were more accurate to the minute, but since he didn't have anything filling his days then it didn't really affect him.

To his slight surprise he found the detective still there, pacing back and forth in front of the window sill. Espio could admire his perseverance, even if it *was* in vain. He narrowed his eyes as Vector didn't even attempt to mask his footsteps crunching in the leaves, tail twitching in confusion. Didn't the so-called gumshoe realize that he was only making it easier for him to take the rice cake and seaweed sitting there on the windowsill? His guard instantly raised as he slowly climbed down the tree and silently took a few steps forward, never taking his eyes off of the crocodile.

"Ugh, get a job as a detective, they said." Vector muttered to himself, pacing harder. "It'll be fun, they said. Now I have to wait for some pseudo-ghost to show up… and maybe it never will…"

The voice was too loud. Espio froze, the gears in his mind turning as he tried to figure out the crocodile's odd behavior. His stomach grumbled in protest at the wait but Espio just couldn't let this go as he glanced around his surroundings to see if anyone else was waiting for an ambush or if there was something else going on.

There! Espio smirked as he saw a loop of rope mostly buried in the mulch, extending out to something in the forest that he could only assume was a trap of some sort. This was the best the detective could do? He really thought he could trick a trained ninja? Espio hesitated slightly, eyeing how long the rope was and concerned that making contact with any part of it would spring the trap and alert the detective of his presence. He had to give it to Vector—the loud muttering and pacing had almost distracted him enough to blindly step in the noose

conveniently placed in his usual route to the windowsill. However there was enough space for him on the other side, so he extended his tail for balance and silently leapt over the rope.

Crack!

Espio gasped as his foot landed awkwardly on something hard underneath the leaves, jumping back from the sound it produced when struck and landing harshly on his backside. He stifled a hiss and struggled to get up, the fall briefly turning him visible before he switched again, chest clenching when he saw Vector leap at him. In a flash he dug through the leaves, grabbing a handful of lose dirt and flinging it in the crocodile's eyes.

"Ack!" Vector stumbled back, clawing at his eyes. Espio swiftly wrapped his thin tail around one of Vector's legs, yanking hard to throw him off balance before hopping back up and barreling into his side. The crocodile went down with a surprised grunt, Espio snatching the rice cake and seaweed and scurrying away, irritated at himself for being so foolish. How could he have missed his landing like that? How could he have not seen that rock or whatever it was hidden in the leaves? His father would never approve.

Speaking of his father…

Espio hesitated, glancing down at the food in his hands. He could almost hear the dark whispers of Kuroshi's voice in his mind, almost see the disgusted look in his eyes.

With a pang in his chest, he tossed his rations aside and continued on.

He didn't deserve to eat anyway.

Not after that pathetic display.

Vector groaned as he sat up, eyes burning. Okay, so he hadn't planned on the thief being a decent fighter. Seriously, the dirt in his eyes was a low blow! However the fast movements to catch him off guard were a smart move, given the crocodile's size and brute strength in direct combat. But still he couldn't help but smirk to himself slightly, knowing that his culprit was definitely smaller than himself and had a long, thin tail covered in scales.

Not to mention that flash of visibility, which he had gotten on the camera of his.

Vector hurried over to the bush where his device was hidden, pressing the button that deactivated the recording process as he flipped around the screen and stiffened at the red battery symbol that greeted him against a dark background.

Stupid cheap camera store.

The crocodile scowled as he shook out his sore muscles and returned to the windowsill, pulling out his black light. "Think about what you know! The mobian was probably a reptile or amphibian of some kind—at least something scaly and with a long tail. Also the fact that I saw it for a second means that it can *definitely* turn itself invisible somehow… maybe just a trick it has? Or a cloak or something?" Vector frowned. "Didn't see a cloak though… was

that purple that I saw? Perhaps? It also could've been just an ability they had, like that Sonic kid and his speed, or maybe correlating to the animal like a chameleon or something… I think it actually might've *looked* like a chameleon or something of the sort when I saw it… I can figure that out later."

Vector kneeled down and shined his light onto the leaves, grinning when—sure enough—he could see splatters of his ink scattered in the leaves while the creature ran away. He quickly started to follow the footprints, knowing that the ink would likely wear off the mobian's boot if they ran far enough.

He hurried deeper and deeper into the woods, weaving around trees and obstacles. Some of the rocks and bushes that the mobian weaved between were a tight fit for the six-foot crocodile, but he didn't mind too much as it only confirmed what he had figured out during their brief fight. He rounded a tree and hesitated slightly, blinking as he found the rice cake and seaweed tossed aside. What… why had the thief dropped them? It could've been an accident, but given the nature of this culprit Vector highly doubted it. The mobian had their prize in their hands! Why give it up now?

Perhaps it was only grabbing the food to prove it's superiority to the detective or just to prove that it could? But then why take from Meredith to begin with and remain anonymous?

Was it trying to prove something to *itself*?

Vector sighed as he realized that the footprints faded out soon afterwards, shrugging and turning away.

At the very least he knew something new about this ghost.

The most important thing being that it *definitely* wasn't a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Vector's not as easy to trick as Espio thought he was! Poor guy needs to learn to not be so hard on himself… but hopefully this gets Vector closer to the truth! ^^

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 13: A Break In The Case

Chapter Summary

Espio stiffened in irritation as he saw that nosy detective once again ‘guarding’ Meredith’s windowsill. It had been a week—did this crocodile not know when to quit? It had all been an entertaining challenge at first, but it was starting to get old *fast*—especially after the gumshoe began to adapt and craft up more clever plans that Espio was irked to admit came close to catching him. Was it too much to ask for an easy meal? Of course he could go dumpster diving again, but Meredith’s cooking was far better and much preferred.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

▶ Minor TW spoilers below ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Espio stiffened in irritation as he saw that nosy detective once again ‘guarding’ Meredith’s windowsill. It had been a week—did this crocodile not know when to quit? It had all been an entertaining challenge at first, but it was starting to get old *fast*—especially after the gumshoe began to adapt and craft up more clever plans that Espio was irked to admit came close to catching him. Was it too much to ask for an easy meal? Of course he could go dumpster diving again, but Meredith’s cooking was far better and much preferred.

”Hey pseudo-ghost, wanna play Go Fish?” Vector called out casually, and shrugged when Espio didn’t respond. “Eh, it was worth a shot. But I know you’re watching me, I know you’re a a reptile, I know you’re either purple or wearing that color, I know you can turn invisible… what’s the point in being so secretive? The rice cake is here waiting whenever you’re ready for it.”

Espio rolled his eyes. Did the detective really think he was going to fall for that? It irked him how condescending Vector sounded, probably unintentionally but still. He watched carefully until the crocodile glanced down at his cards before snatching the rice cake and holding it close to his chest—covering it with his body so that it too would remain unseen. Vector sighed before he even looked up. “Don’t you think this is getting old, bud? I know you’re there. Tell ya what—I can get you some help with food or shelter or whatever it is you need if you’d just show yourself and admit that you’re not a ghost. How does that sound?” Vector

went over to place another rice cake on the windowsill, lingering and letting his eyes scan the foliage. “Really? Nothing? This is a pretty good offer, you know.”

The crocodile stayed in front of the cake, crossing his arms. “I’m stayin’ right here. Whenever you’re ready to show yourself I’ll take ya out for a full meal. I mean, funds are kinda low right now… oh never mind that! Maybe I can make ya something! I’ve gotten quite proficient at microwave meals, if I do say so myself…”

Espio stiffened in irritation. What was he even doing? Trying to steal from people’s windows and timing his strikes with some ridiculous gumshoe who knew he was there? That wasn’t the way of a ninja! That was the way of beggar.

And he was no beggar.

Silent as the wind he turned on his tail and began making his way through the forest, leaving the ignorant detective alone. He decided to head back into the city, even though all the hustle and bustle made his brain hurt. No matter how much he tried he just couldn’t get accustomed to the noise—the vendors shouting at tourists to purchase from them, the angry drivers snapping at the traffic, the wailing of a child who had just dropped their ice cream cone… it was all too much. However at night it was slightly more bearable even if it *was* more dangerous with less reasonable people and more thugs and drunkards stumbling out of bars. He could avoid them easily enough with his invisibility, but more than once he’d witnessed innocent mobians walking alone at night only to be jumped by someone in a tacky mask and wielding some form of weapon. Often some young hero would run through—Sonic the Hedgehog, people called him, and Espio could recall ~~Mugai~~ mentioning him—to stun the attacker, handing the purse or wallet back to it’s owner with a confident flare. They’d thank him profusely, and then with a wink and a flash of blue he’d be gone, likely off to the next city.

He seemed so… free.

Running around Mobius and living life to the fullest.

And not often alone, as he had a young, two-tailed fox aiding him in many fights.

Espio shook himself, trying to ignore the pang of longing in his chest. He was fine by himself, and there was no way in *chaos* that he’d allow himself to be trapped by others again. Why anyone would subject themselves to such torture was beyond him, but he supposed that they just hadn’t witnessed the darker side of society yet.

Blissful ignorance.

Something he’d never be able to go back to.

He made his way long a narrow alley, eyes set on a filled-to-the-brim dumpster. His stomach rolled slightly at the thought of the stench, but he couldn’t be picky. With a set face he looked around to ensure that he was alone before darting over towards his prize.

He heard a slight whimper and stiffened, freezing in place as he strained his ears. He had checked, hadn't he? Where had the sound come from?

Had he been followed?

Had one of his clan members or enemies found him…

His chest squeezed, muscles tensing up as it suddenly became very hard to breathe. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep his inhalations silent even though his lungs were screaming at him. It was just a ridiculous reaction to a ridiculous memory—why would any of the chameleons he knew *whimper*? But his body refused to believe he was safe and a headache began to pound behind his eyes as he suppressed it all, trying to will away the onslaught of memories.

His tail coiled and tighter around his own leg in an attempt to ground himself as he stumbled around the side of the dumpster, trying to get away from whatever phantom trauma his brain had convinced him was there. His foot caught on something hidden behind the metal bin, sending him crashing to the ground noisily. He hissed as his scales scraped against the asphalt, feeling a fiery burn flare up.

Shut up shut up shut up…

He promptly shoved his own arm into his mouth, biting down hard to muffle himself as he remained silent, heart pounding so loudly he was certain all of Mobius could hear him. He needed to be quiet—he wasn't alone and besides that he was above withering his dignity in pain.

Ninjas didn't cry.

Ever

Especially for something as small as this.

He took a deep breath, knowing that hunger and the lack of sleep was likely doing it's best to make him more emotional. Pathetic. He bit down again on his arm, appreciating the grounding sensation of pain. The chameleon waited like that for a few more moments before slowly releasing himself and looking around warily. No one had come for him by some miracle, but he still chided himself for being so careless. The question remained: who had whimpered if no one was in the alley?

Another small whine echoed through and made him flinch, realizing that it was originating from right next to him. He frowned at the object that had tripped him—a small, cardboard box. Was… was the noise coming from there? But who—

Espio slowly stood up, ignoring the stinging from his injuries as he gingerly peeled back one of the flaps and peered inside.

He was greeted by the sight of an young bee, wriggling uncomfortably in his sheets and wailing with his little face scrunched up.

Espio's stomach dropped. What in the world? A baby this young needed his parents! Why was he left alone like this, and in an alley no less? The baby screamed again, and Espio winced as the sound pierced his ears. He glanced around to ensure it was just the two of them before turning himself visible so that the child knew he wasn't alone. The little bee went silent, staring up at him with wide, tear-stained eyes. Espio squinted at the sticky note stabled to the front of the blanket, reading 'CHARMY' in big letters.

It was a very old note.

Espio's stomach rolled.

He was starting to realize that the child must be abandoned, but the note suggested some form of hope that he would be be found. Perhaps the child was handed down from various mobians in the hopes that someone would take him, only for someone to finally break the cycle and leave him next to the dumpster as if he were nothing more than thrown-out goods.

To be discarded and left to die.

Unwanted and unloved.

Not supposed to exist.

Just like he had been.

~~*Shards of old eggshells littering the rocks at the bottom of the cliff… phantom imaginings of screams plaguing his mind as he thought of all the children who had been so brutally killed before they even got the chance to live… knowing that he was almost one of them…*~~

The baby started to cry again and he winced, brought back to reality as he hesitated mere moments before scooping the child into his arms awkwardly. His heart hammered as Charmy shivered and nuzzled into him, unsure of what to do next. He was in no way, shape or form prepared to take care of a child as young as this, but how could he leave him there? The baby giggled slightly, babbling and reaching up towards Espio's face. The chameleon remained frozen as small, weak hands felt around his horn and cheeks, a strange feeling in his chest. Yep—there was no way he was going to let this child die. But what could he do? He could barely feed himself much less figure out how to take care of a baby!

He hesitated sightly, thinking back to his one-sided interactions with that determined detective, Vector. Although annoying, the crocodile had displayed impressive amounts of perseverance and persistence as long as he was on the case. Whether out of personal principle or desperation for pay Espio wasn't sure, but what was it he'd heard him mention to Meredith?

That he never turns down work that pays?

Well, Espio could probably scrap up a few rings.

Vector groaned as he slumped into his office, exhausted from yet another unfruitful stakeout. He'd finally determined that the 'ghost' was gone after turning around a few times and seeing the rice cake unmoved, and it only concluded another failed mission. Why was this so hard? He'd expected this case to be easy money but it was turning out to seem nearly impossible. He wasn't one to give up, but he was certainly feeling the tax.

"Come on, just give me a break already!" He pleaded to no one in particular, angrily kicking a chair. "This case should've been over a while ago! How is this so hard? I just need *something*… a clue… a tip… heck, maybe just a little bit of luck—"

Two sharp knocks rang out from his door and he froze, glancing over with a sudden increase in his heartbeats. Was that… a knock? For him? Maybe a client? Something else? He paused for a few more moments, but no more sound came. Straightening his chain, he stood up and made his way to the door before opening it. "You've reached Vector the Crocodile, Chaotix Detective Agency. How may I assist…" Vector swallowed up the rest of his speech when he didn't immediately see anyone, taking a moment to register that he needed to look lower.

Way lower.

A small, scrawny purple chameleon stared up at him formally, and Vector frowned. "Uh… heya kid. What can I help ya with? And where are your parents—"

"Greetings, Sir." The young Mobian spoke up, voice round and slightly accented. "I am here to report a missing person, and would very much like to inquire if it is indeed true that you accept any form and amount of pay?"

"Well, yeah technically, but what—"

"Wonderful. Here is a young bee that I found in an alleyway." He said bluntly, picking up a box from next to him and handing it to a shocked Vector, who bewilderedly took it. "I am uncertain of his exact age, however on the way here I could detect certain enunciations that implied a fragile background in speech and his wings also look fairly healthy. Unfortunately I do not have much to offer at this particular moment, but I'm certain I could acquire some form of compensation—"

"Yeah yeah, slow your roll, kid." Vector lifted the flap of the cardboard box and almost jumped in disbelief when he indeed found a small bee inside. "Great Gaia! Where the heck did ya find a stranded baby?"

"My apologies if I wasn't clear, but I found him in the alley across Sunset City." The chameleon told him formally, and Vector's eyes narrowed. Who the heck was this kid? He looked no older than eleven… twelve if he was pushing it. He was speaking with larger words than Vector ever cared to use and… and why did he look so scrawny and banged up? There were cuts and bruises littering his body all over and Vector could even see his ribs peeking through around the heart pattern on his chest. He took a deep breath and gave him a suspicious look.

"Alright, what's goin' on here? Where are your parents?" Vector asked, and the chameleon stiffened.

”I did not mean to convey that I am in need of service, and my deepest apologies if I miscommunicated. I only intended to make this child known to you so that you might be able to locate his guardians or obtain new ones if it should come to that.” The chameleon began, and Vector sighed.

”Okay, but ya gotta at least give me a name to work with.” Vector quickly backtracked when the kid’s eyes narrowed. “Just to put at the top of my file report! It’s nothin’ serious. Unless ya want me to keep callin’ ya ‘kid’.”

”An understandable request.” The Mobian acknowledged, but still he hesitated. Vector began to feel a bit impatient and more than a little uneasy. Where had this kid spawned from? Did his parents care that he was in such a rough condition?

Did he even have parents *to* care?

”Well? Do ya gotta name?” Vector finally prodded a bit, and the chameleon looked away.

”…Espio.” He finally said, and Vector nodded.

”Espio? That’ll do.” He offered a weak yet encouraging smile, peeking into the box again to see a little paper stapled to the bee’s chest that read ‘CHARMY’ in sloppy letters. Vector let out an amused grunt. “And it looks like the mystery baby is Charmy.” The bee repeated the name sloppily with a giggle and Vector’s eyes softened slightly. Who on earth would abandon this child to an alleyway?

”I am aware of the fact.” Espio said simply. “Now if you wouldn’t mind, I do need to take my leave but I will return with whatever rings I can save up—“

”Hold it right there, kid.” Vector sighed, and Espio stiffened. “Ya really think I’m just gonna let you walk out into the streets again without checkin’ around first? Are your folks around? Do they treat you right?”

”That information is simply not relevant, and it is intrusive for you to ask for such private details about my life. This is strictly a business encounter.” Espio told him, and Vector struggled to refrain from rolling his eyes.

”If you were an adult, maybe. But you’re not, and kids your age shouldn’t be fending for themselves.” Vector narrowed his eyes.

”’Kids my age’? I’m ten years old.” Espio told him with a scoff, as if that should be some valid point in their argument, but it only made Vector’s stomach drop.

”…Ten?” The crocodile spluttered. “Gaia, where the heck are your parents? Who on earth is letting a ten-year-old wander around by himself?”

”My parental figures’ whereabouts are none of your concern.” Espio repeated firmly. “This discussion is at an end. Please take good precautions when it comes to the outcome of Charmy—“

”What… no we’re not done talking about this!” Vector began, but Espio shot him a glare.

”Yes, we are.” He replied, and with that he disappeared.

Vector blinked. It was the strangest thing, seeing someone simply fade from sight. He looked around desperately, straining his ears but hearing nothing. It was as if the scrawny kid had vanished from existence, and he just couldn’t quite understand it. “Hey, Espio? Where’d ya go, kid? Hello?”

He heard nothing else and sighed, staring down at the bee in the box. It looked up at him innocently, wings flapping with energy. “Well… I guess I’ve gotta figure out what to do with you next. Heck, this is adding up to be the weirdest day of my—” Vector froze, the pieces finally clicking in his head. Had… had that really happened?

A scrawny, underfed chameleon kid wearing clunky boots who had the ability to vanish from sight without a trace or a sound?

Had he really found his ghost?

He quickly turned tail and hurried back into his office, gently setting the box next to his chair before pulling up various research tabs on his computer regarding young bee care and chameleon mobians.

It was time to prepare.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Charmy has entered the scene! And Vector has finally found his ghost… now catching that ghost might be a bit more tricky but our optimistic detective isn’t one to give up! Whatever he decides, it has to feel like Espio’s choice or else it’ll never work for the stubborn purple boi :3

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 14: The Storm

Chapter Summary

> ”Heya kid…” Vector said slowly, sidling into the back woods behind Meredith’s house. The old mountain goat was watching him with an unamused look.
>
> ”When are ya gonna give it up? You know that my ghost isn’t the sociable type!” She shouted after him. “Just let it get it’s dinner in peace!”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome back to another chapter of The Art of Espionage! Let’s see how Vector reacts now that he knows who his ghost is… :D
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Heya kid…” Vector said slowly, sidling into the back woods behind Meredith’s house. The old mountain goat was watching him with an unamused look.

”When are ya gonna give it up? You know that my ghost isn’t the sociable type!” She shouted after him. “Just let it get it’s dinner in peace!”

”Definitely not sociable, but also not a ghost.” Vector raised his voice slightly. “Isn’t that right, Espio?”

”Espio?” Hank scrunched up his face. “Did you figure something out?”

”I think so. Call it a stroke of luck.” He sat down in his usual spot next to the window. “I had a nice neighbor lady give me some old baby equipment from when she was raising her kids, so Charmy is all set. Thought you’d like to know.”

Silence. Vector hesitated, realizing that he didn’t quite know if Espio was even here yet. He glanced over at the rice cake in slight embarrassment, sighing and averting his eyes. What if Espio didn’t even want to come back here after revealing himself? He had to be clever to last as long as he had on his own. What if he was somewhere else?

”You uh… you said that your neighbors have been reporting a pest problem, right?” Vector cleared his throat, and Hank nodded.

”Yeah, why?” He asked.

”Well I think our little non-ghost friend might try to—“ He began, but stopped when his eyes met the empty windowsill. His lips quirked up in a smirk as he looked around. “Ah, so ya did show up! Good to see you again! Or, well, *not* see you again…”

”Okay, what’s going on?” Hank’s eyes darted around the forest. “I still can’t see anyone. Did you catch the thief or not?”

Vector hesitated before lowering his voice and leaning in. “Don’t be mad, but I don’t think it would do any good to ‘catch’ this guy.”

”What do you mean? If he’s stealing then he belongs in jail!” Hank crossed his arms. “Or at least needs to stop.”

”He’s a kid.” Vector whispered back. “He’s ten.”

Hank blinked. “Ten? As in, years old?”

”Well I certainly don’t mean seconds.” Vector rolled his eyes.

”Not even a teenager? Where are his parents?” Hank looked back out at the forest, the irritated expression morphing into uncertainty. “You’re sure about this?”

”He wouldn’t tell me where his parents were, but I’m pretty sure they’re not in the picture. He’s really rough for wear and underfed—we just need to get him somewhere safe until we can figure out a guardian. Right now his small thefts are the least of our problems.” Vector replied. “I doubt he’d be open to the idea of a guardian or foster care, and if he’s in this condition then I don’t think his parents deserve any ‘world’s best’ mugs.” Raising his voice again he made sure to enunciate his words. “I heard there’s a big storm coming tonight, but personally I love the sound of rain. Don’t you agree, Mr. Hank?”

Hank blinked. “Uh… yeah I guess it’s kinda nice.”

”Exactly!” Vector resisted the urge to look around. “So guess I’m gonna keep the upstairs window of my agency with a large tree next to it open tonight. It’s a nice, quiet little room with no one living in it.”

Understanding dawned on Hank’s face. “Oh, that sounds like a good idea. A little ambience noice that’s not directly in your room but somewhere close by.”

“What does the rain have to do with my ghost?” Meredith wondered aloud, and Vector glanced at her sharply.

”Nothing at all, ma’am. And even though I’m sure our little friend is listening around here somewhere, I’m going to head back to the office before the storm hits. I might be a crocodile but I still would like a nice, dry home to go back to when it rains.” He turned away, finally allowing himself a glance at the surrounding trees as he walked away, hoping that his research on chameleons would pay off in the supplies he’d bought earlier that day. It

might've been a bit more than his budget allowed, but he was certain that it'd be worth it if it helped out this kid. "Have a good day, Ma'am. And best wishes to you too, Espio."

Espio shivered slightly, pressing himself against the trunk of a tree and wishing away the pouring rain that was soaking him. He wasn't an idiot—he knew that Vector knew what he was doing, offering a room like that. But *accepting* help rather than taking it felt like an act of weakness, and he refused to feel that way again.

Overpowered.

Helpless.

Worthless.

At least Charmy was safe though, even if Espio still had to figure out a way to pay Vector for his services. Another crack of lightning made him jump slightly, making himself as small as he could in the crook of the tree. He waited a few seconds, bracing himself for the boom of thunder that soon followed and rattled his bones. A room did sound kind of nice right about now… somewhere dry and warm…

He shook himself. No, he couldn't think about that. He was a ninja! He could handle any situation and had weathered many storms before. He hated every one of them, but he also knew that they would pass.

Very, *very* slowly.

The purple chameleon could feel every single second in agonizing detail—every patter of rain, every droplet rolling down his face, every shiver that ran through his body. Gaia did he hate these ridiculous storms! Logically he reminded himself that they nourished the earth and were a necessary part of the lush foliage around him, but he still felt miserable trying to balance on a slippery branch and attempting to keep warm. Wanting to accept Vector's offer just proved that he was getting soft; he'd already grown too accustomed to the crocodile's presence after a week and allowed himself to question whether or not there were actually decent people in the world wanting to help. Well, maybe not *good* people, but perhaps neutral until triggered. It was ridiculous! Everyone was just moping around the planet trying to find a purpose in life and striving to be loved by others even if it meant getting hurt and rejected time and time again. He shivered and glanced down at his gloved hands tightly gripping the branch. Why would anyone love him? Why would anyone even *like* him after they got to know him? All Vector's offer was was a charity case out of pity for the scrawny chameleon out on his own, and he refused to be treated that way.

But maybe… maybe it wasn't technically *accepting* help if the window happened to be open, and at least it was predictable. Vector had already proven himself to be an unworthy opponent, and even though he was larger he was also unable to sense his movements when invisible and seemed very gentle and compassionate with his initiative regarding Charmy. The crocodile would never even have to know he was there! He would slip in silently, wait out the storm in an invisible vigil, and then leave without a trace. Vector would never have to witness his weakness, and at the very least he could check in on Charmy to ensure the

crocodile was being truthful. He could think of it as a mission—yes, perfect. A mission to protect Charmy and observe his enemy.

With a nod Espio began to shift his weight on the branch, reaching for a good hold to climb down. The slippery bark betrayed his balance, however, and with a gasp he was sent crashing to the forest floor, hissing at the sharp pain of landing on his foot wrong. He lay there for a few moments, breathing hard and flushing in embarrassment before slowly standing up and trying to avoid his throbbing ankle. He took a deep breath, knowing that he deserved the pain as punishment for his pathetic mistake of slipping on that branch.

With fresh resolve he slowly made his way out of the forest, invisibly heading into town and appreciating how the harsh weather kept most of the people indoors. The sidewalks and streets were practically abandoned, save for the occasional car that rushed past and splashed him in cold, murky water when it's tires hit a puddle. He would've dodged but at this point was too tired to, feeling the combined effects of the dipping temperatures and his injured ankle. Instead he trudged on, navigating his way around the now-familiar city until he came across the tall, lanky building that he knew to be the Chaotix Detective Agency.

As per Vector's not-instructions, he circled around to the back and eyed the old tree that sure enough reached to the second-floor window. Normally scaling the tree would be no problem, but right now he was lethargic and hurt. Perhaps he could…

Espio shook his head. What in chaos was he thinking? He was a ninja! Failure could not be an option considered in his head, as success began in the mind. He closed his eyes and envisioned himself reaching the window, nodding resolutely and beginning his climb.

Sure enough he soon crawled through the opening and immediately felt the change in temperature. Further inspection revealed a small heat lamp in the corner of the small area, doing its best to keep up with the cold outside. Espio felt a surge of relief as he limped towards it, finally allowing himself to collapse in front of the blissful beam of light and curling up to preserve body warmth. A brief consideration that Vector had placed the lamp in there on purpose crossed his mind, but everything felt so heavenly compared to the freezing rain outside that he didn't linger on the thought. He could perhaps visit Charmy later… after he warmed up a bit…

But he was asleep within seconds.

Vector finally cracked the door open, hearing soft, slow breathing coming from inside. He glanced around the heated room for any sign of Espio, at first seeing nothing but then noticing some wet footprints leading right up to the heat lamp he'd placed, a puddle forming in front of it. He smiled slightly, eyes softening at the sight of flickering scales attempting to hold on to invisibility but relaxing as the chameleon's slumber deepened. Even if he ran in the morning, at least Vector could sleep knowing that the kid would rest well tonight. Besides, the chameleon needed this to be his choice or else he'd never accept any help.

With a nod, he set down a small bag of food just inside before closing the door softly and walking away.

Chapter End Notes

YEAHHHH HOORAY FOR VECTOR AND ESPIO!! At least Es will get a warm room… but how will he react after a good night of sleep and once he gets back to his senses?

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 15: A New Detective In Town

Chapter Summary

Espio stirred slightly, the warmth around him attempting to lull him back to sleep. He shifted a bit closer to the heat source, bliss filling his mind as he rested…

He gasped and sat bolt upright, nerves on high alert. How could he have let himself sleep in? How could he have let himself *sleep* in the first place? Where even was he?

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Happy Chaotix Tuesday, and welcome back to a new chapter! Let's see how Es feels now that he's gotten a good night of sleep…

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Espio stirred slightly, the warmth around him attempting to lull him back to sleep. He shifted a bit closer to the heat source, bliss filling his mind as he rested…

He gasped and sat bolt upright, nerves on high alert. How could he have let himself sleep in? How could he have let himself *sleep* in the first place? Where even was he?

The events of last night came flooding back to him as he looked around the small room, window still open and a slight drizzle still lingering outside. He watched the rain for a few moments, the sound of gentle pattering soothing his frazzled mind. He was… safe. It came almost as a surprise, as he hadn't slept indoors for many months and the home he had known before that wasn't exactly comforting.

Practical and functional?

Yes.

But tense with the knowledge that anyone could come for him—perhaps even to hurt him—at any moment?

Also yes.

When was the last time he'd been able to wake up slow like this? No one else was present and he wasn't in immediate danger of being discovered. It felt… nice. Being able to simply

look around while absorbing the warmth of the heater, waiting for his mind to grow accustomed to this new state of consciousness. But it wasn't something to get used to, and he knew he couldn't linger there. He just needed to check up on Charmy and—

Espio blinked, seeing a slightly-crumpled paper bag sitting innocently by the door. That… hadn't been there last night, to his memory. Had someone snuck in? He knew he'd slept hard but not *that* hard! What kind of a ninja was he? With a grimace he slowly started to stand before crying out and falling down again as his ankle gave way. He hissed and grabbed his leg, willing the pain to stop. Biting his tongue and chiding himself for his exclamation, the chameleon slowly crawled over to the bag like some pathetic little worm. However he couldn't hear any footsteps approaching so perhaps he'd gotten lucky.

Peering into the bag he sucked in a sharp breath, eyes narrowing hungrily at the sight of various food containers. There was some noodles, some Mongolian beef, a few fortune cookies… did Vector enjoy this type of food as well? Espio didn't even care at this point, primal instincts overpowering his dignity as he began to devour the rations greedily.

The food was soon gone, and before Espio knew it he was scrounging around the bottom of the bag in a vain hope that something would be left. Upon finding nothing he sighed and set it aside, feeling a bit more satisfied than he had in a long time. But it didn't come without guilt, as the realization was starting to set in that it was likely Vector who had provided this meal. So now he had to pay the detective for taking care of Charmy, offering him shelter *and* food? A few rings could likely be acquired on the side of the street, but not *that* many!

What did that crocodile want from him?

And how could he have been so foolish to accept all of this debt?

Espio grimaced, realizing that his act was up. He was no longer anonymous but had someone who not only knew what he looked like, but also who had provided him with services the chameleon couldn't afford. How on earth would he pay Vector back? Besides that, his ankle wasn't in any condition to aid him in climbing down the tree now that adrenaline had worn off. He could definitely try, but what would happen when he came back to repay Vector? Of course he could just disappear from the crocodile's life, but how could he live with himself knowing that someone out there thought he was some weakling without honor? Ninjas could face the hard truths and own up to their mistakes.

There was no use in hiding anymore.

Espio sighed and pushed himself up, limping towards the door.

The moment he opened it he hesitated, not liking the unfamiliar territory. A rickety banister greeted him, and to his left was a narrow staircase that led down to an open living room and an office with the door cracked. To his right was another doorway which the chameleon presumed to be Vector's room, but the light coming from that office indicated occupation. With a deep breath he hobbled over to the stairs and started to make his way down them.

Creeeeeeack!

Espio gasped at the sudden sound, startling away and tripping over the uneven step he was on. He toppled down the last few steps, biting back a hiss as he hit the wall separating himself from the office. Vector was out in an instant, kneeling next to him worriedly. “Espio! Are you alright?”

”I’m… fine…” Espio grit out, flinching away from Vector’s hands and watching the crocodile hesitate in confusion. “My apologies. I was unaware of the precariously unstable configuration of the stairs.”

”Yeah, heh, I’d get it fixed but don’t really have the cash right now.” Vector frowned as Espio started to get up, favoring his right ankle. “Hey—are you hurt?”

”It happened before I entered this particular building. It is of no concern to you.” Espio replied, trying to salvage what was left of his dignity as he stood up as straight as he could. “I wish you many pleasantries this day and would like to discuss as to how I might repay you for your services. The rations were… much appreciated.”

”Um… good morning to you too.” Vector hesitated, eyes softening as he also got up. “And there’s really no need to pay me back. Call it a favor.”

”Unless that is a synonym for ‘debt’ then I am not interested in softening the reality.” Espio told him firmly, and Vector blinked. “I am no beggar and am prepared to go to whatever extent it takes to reimburse you for your services.”

”Oh! I… uh…” Vector swallowed hard, eyes briefly flicking around the various bruises and cuts littering Espio’s body. The chameleon lifted his chin, trying to maintain an air of professionalism. “Honestly I was happy to help.”

”I am in no need of charity. However an exchange is reasonable—assistance for compensation.”

Vector shook his head in disbelief, clearly at a loss. “Well…”

”My apologies for the intrusion. I understand that it is early and perhaps not the most convenient time to pressure you for an answer.” Espio turned and began to hobble towards the door. “I will return later with rings and whatever else I can acquire.”

”WAIT!” Vector cried, and Espio stiffened, turning around with an expectant eye. Vector hesitated, flushing slightly. “Well… uh… it’s still raining out there, and you’re hurt! You sure you don’t wanna stay a bit longer? I’ve got some leftovers in the fridge if you’re still hungry…”

”You’ve done more than enough, and given your hospitality I am reassured that Charmy is in good hands.” Espio glanced over towards the office. “Is he in there?”

”Oh—yes he’s doing just fine! He’s sleeping right now, but that little guy kept me up most of the night.” Vector chuckled weakly.

”My apologies for the hinderance to your slumber, and I can assure you that I will pay you back for your services.” Espio turned to leave again, only to have Vector pipe up from behind him.

”Wait! You… uh… you know, I could probably use some help with Charmy.” Vector told him, and Espio stiffened. “And that disappearing trick you have? Why, it’s one of the most impressive things I’ve seen in my life!”

”Your flattery has no effect on me. What is your point?” Espio asked bluntly, and Vector cleared his throat.

”If ya… well… if ya want you could maybe help me out around the agency for a bit.” Vector quickly raised his hands in surrender as Espio began to protest. “Just for a bit! You could stay in that upstairs room and work here as a junior detective in the meantime. Consider it a form of payment. What do ya say?”

”Work… here?” Espio tilted his head.

”Yeah! Ya know, most adults get jobs in exchange for rings so they can afford food and rent and stuff like that. That’s how we get paid.” Vector explained. “I wouldn’t mind if ya… worked here if ya really want to pay me back.”

Espio hesitated. He could tell that Vector was likely just trying to throw him a bone, but the request wasn’t unreasonable. Services in exchange for services? Not to mention a roof over his head and food in his belly? He’d also be able to look after Charmy… but of course he had to remember that it would all be temporary. He would stay until his debt was paid and then go out once again on his own. His eyes narrowed as he glanced at Vector’s outstretched hand. “No strings attached?”

”None at all!” Vector chirped.

”And *only* until my debt to you is repaid?”

”You betcha.”

”And you won’t attempt to trap or imprison me?”

”Consider yourself free as a flicky.”

Espio hesitated a few more moments before finally nodding and shaking Vector’s hand. “Then I would be honored to work alongside you.”

Vector grinned. “Likewise.”

Vector watched in complete bafflement as Espio sorted through his bills, occasionally asking for clarification on various words but otherwise working in silence. It had been a couple of hours since the kid was officially hired, and Vector wanted to give him a simple job to start off with since he insisted on starting work right away. What better task than to simply place the wayward papers in a stack? But the moment Espio started on the task he began to actually

organize them and figure out the sums of the bills. The crocodile watched in bewilderment as the familiar mess slowly morphed into order, having only offered Espio the job to keep him at the agency until he could figure something out and not having expected him to actually help. “You, uh, sure you know what you’re doing there?”

”It is nothing more than simple math and efficient organization.” The chameleon replied. “I am glad to offer my services and am familiar enough with the English lexicon and numerical symbols so that I can perform effectively.”

”Right. Well…” Vector glanced at the clock. “It’s getting kinda late, you wanna call it a day? You’ve already done more in these past few hours than I’ve done in months!”

”I am more than capable of continuing on.” Espio gestured to the various stacks around him. “Everything here was in an abysmal state of disarray and will hinder our focus on any new work. I will finish.”

”Well can I at least make us some dinner?” Vector tried, a bit bewildered at how quickly this young kid adapted to his new role in the agency. Sure living alone for Gaia knows how long would give him an impressive amount of mental flexibility, but it was uncanny of someone his age. Espio glanced up, hesitating slightly.

”I do not believe that I have done enough to deserve a meal yet.” He replied, turning back to his work as Vector’s jaw dropped. “I will let you know when I am done with this task.”

”Deserve a… Es, you don’t have to earn food from me.” He took a tentative step forward, eyes creasing in concern. “I’m not some Dr. Eggman, you know. You can eat anytime ya want.”

”I am unfamiliar with that metaphor, and I apologize.” Espio looked up at him over the top of his papers warily, a question in those golden eyes.

”You haven’t heard of Dr. Eggman yet? Mustachioed weirdo trying to take over the planet?” Vector sighed. “Well, it just means that I’m not so cruel as to try to keep food from you. If you’re gonna work here then I’m gonna take care of ya.” A whimper came from the cradle in the corner and Vector glanced over. “And I’m gonna take care of Charmy. I just finished making a honey mixture for him and then I’m gonna make some canned soup or something. Do you want any? And I don’t wanna hear anything about if ya deserve it or not because ya do.”

Espio hesitated slightly, watching Vector closely as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. When the crocodile only looked at him expectantly he cleared his throat. “I… would like that. Thank you.”

Vector nodded and left the room, stomach rolling at the idea of someone keeping food from a *child* because they hadn’t done enough.

Where in chaos had Espio come from?

Chapter End Notes

YEAHHHH THE CHAOTIX ARE TOGETHER FINALLY!!! :DDD But hopefully poor Es will learn to warm up more… Vector just wants him to feel safe TvT

Next chapter out Thursday (most likely lol) so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 16: Unwanted

Chapter Summary

> *Kaito's stomach rolled as he stumbled back, hot, sticky blood dripping from his hands. In one fist he gripped a dirtied kunai, Mugai choking and gagging out morbid sounds caused by the attempt to scream from a carved-out throat.*
>
> *He'd done it.*
>
> *He killed his brother.*

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome back to a new chapter! Let's see how the first morning of the Chaotix team goes! :3
>
> ▶ Minor TW spoilers below!
>
> Thank you all so much for your support, and as always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito's stomach rolled as he stumbled back, hot, sticky blood dripping from his hands. In one fist he gripped a dirtied kunai, Mugai choking and gagging out morbid sounds caused by the attempt to scream from a carved-out throat.

He'd done it.

He killed his brother.

"Well done, Kaito." Kuroshi came up from behind, placing a hand on the young chameleon's shoulder and squeezing hard. "Now you're just like me."

"Like he wants to be like you, Kuro!" Riku spat, tail flicking in agitation. "Like anyone would ever want to follow your leadership! Look what you've done!"

Kuroshi's grip tightened, and Kaito flinched as his nails began to dig into his scales. "We all become who raised us. It is inevitable. One might try to redirect a tree's direction with posts and trimming, but it all sprouts from the same roots and grows the same fruit."

”I didn’t mean to…” Kaito mumbled, but cried out as his father’s hand began to grow white hot, searing his shoulder and branding the scar into his flesh.

”Oh Kaito, don’t you remember what happens to the weak?” Kuroshi asked darkly. “Ketsu tried to save you and look where that ended him! Then Mugai betrayed us and you showed him the consequences. They are dead because of you.”

”I didn’t!” Kaito tried to squirm away from his father’s burning grip but couldn’t escape. What was happening to him? He didn’t… he would never kill his brother, right? But he did and… and he needed to get over it… be a ninja…

”Stop struggling, Kaito!” Kuroshi scowled. “I taught you better than to defy me! You can never escape me, you know. You can run all you want, try to change your ways or find a new life or a new name, but I will forever *be a part of you.”*

”It’s not true!” Kaito cried, wide eyes staring at the black spot Kuroshi’s grip had left behind.

Dark as his father’s own scales.

He tried desperately to scrub off the mark with his free hand, but to his horror a fire spread to his fingers and quickly raced up his arm as the chameleon tried to escape the flames. He fell to the ground in agony, watching as his father looked down on him in disappointment. “I thought you learned your lesson, Kaito, but it appears that I was mistaken. You were never supposed to exist, and because of your inability to step up and be a leader our entire village is scattered. You can try to flee the shame, but you will never escape me.”

”Kaito, help!” Screamed a voice, and Kaito instantly recognized it as Yuki. “Please! Help me! Kaito!”

”Yuki? Where are you?” Kaito choked out, writing in pain and trying to get up. “I can’t see you!”

”I hope you’re happy!” Came another resentful voice that belonged to Ketsu, and Kaito flinched. “I hope that you get the future that I never had! I hope that in abandoning all of us you can find some sort of closure!”

”I’m sorry!” Kaito screamed, curling up in a ball. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I failed you all I’m sorry—“

”SORRY WON’T CHANGE THE TRUTH!” Chorused all five voices of his father, uncle, brothers and guardian. “You failed your one purpose in life! Who could ever love you like this? Broken and pitiful and weak—“

”I don’t know what you want me to do…” Kaito almost whispered as the voices echoed louder and louder, blocking out everything else with their taunting cacophony.

”YOU FAILED! YOU FAILED US ALL!”

Espio sat bolt upright, tail curling around himself as his heart hammered and he looked around the softly-lit room to try to regain his senses.

No one was coming for him.

It was just a nightmare.

Don't react don't react don't react…

Espio took a deep breath, closing his eyes and letting the air fill his lungs. Feelings never lasted forever and these too would pass. He just needed to… well…

The chameleon frowned. Right, he was in the Chaotix agency. There was his heat lamp that cast the room in a warm glow, there was the window he had crawled through the other night, there was the door that led to the stairwell… it was all predictable and stable. He had a strange sense at waking up in the same, comfortable place twice but didn't think too much of it. Now that he was awake he needed to do something productive, perhaps organize some more of the office? Yeah, that sounded good.

He just needed to pass the time before he was given a task by his new boss.

Vector yawned, rolling over in his bed and nuzzling into his pillow. He always loved these solitary mornings, being able to wake up slow to the sound of birdsong and the murmuring banter of tourists trying to see as much of the city as they could in one brief vacation. Here he was living on the edge—alone and on the down-low. At least there was never any shouting or arguing or anything and he could just relax and—

Crash!

Vector shot up like a spring, heart hammering as his bleary vision took in the empty cradle in the corner of the room and the sounds of babbling and shouting downstairs.

So much for alone.

But speaking of…

"Charmy!" Vector stumbled out of bed and flew to the door, hurrying downstairs before his brain could even fully comprehend that he was awake. He stiffened slightly, seeing the little bee crawling speedily around and occasionally lifting slightly off the ground with his wings as Espio dove to grab him. A pot Vector had left on the stove from yesterday was now on the ground, presumably the source of the crash. The chameleon finally managed to grab the young bee's leg and held him up in vexation, Charmy giggling and swinging upside down.

"Greetings, Vector, and my apologies for the disruption." The chameleon told him. "I do believe that I was mistaken about Charmy's age and capabilities and am now realizing that with the proper nourishment he has regained his strength."

"Eh, it's not your fault, Es. None of us have any way of knowing how old he really is." Vector yawned and trudged forward, adrenaline wearing off and causing him to realize how

early in the morning it was. He gently took Charmy and held him in the crook of his arm, the bee nuzzling his little head into Vector's bicep and letting out a few sleepy sounds. Vector chuckled and gave him the pacifier clipped to his pajamas. "Oh so now you're tired? But what're ya doing up so early, Espio? You look more awake then both of us combined."

"A ninja is born in the darkness to live in the darkness." Espio turned away, putting some of the chairs in Vector's rickety dining set back in place. "We thrive in the night and do not waste away our solitude."

Vector perked up slightly, eyeing the ten-year old in curiosity. "A ninja? Like in that new movie?" Images of children's shows and action figures ran through his head, but Espio glanced over at him with a look of distaste.

"Movie? I am unfamiliar with that word, but I meant that I am trained in the art of ninjitsu." The chameleon informed him.

"Riiiight." Vector tried to keep his doubts at bay. This was normal for children! Heck, when he was a kid he could imagine he was an astronaut or a rock singer! At least this was the most usual, childlike trait Espio portrayed, and Vector should indulge in the fantasy to hopefully help Espio feel at home. "That's neat! I mean, I knew you could turn in visible and fight and stuff, but this is even cooler. Who's your favorite ninja?"

"My… favorite ninja?" Espio frowned.

"Yeah! Like you know, who do you look up to?" Vector asked, thinking back to all the detective shows that inspired him growing up. "I haven't seen many ninja films honestly, but I'm sure you're the expert! So who's your favorite ninja that you look up to the most?"

Espio hesitated. "…Yuki." He turned away quickly, and Vector hesitated.

"Is that… like… someone from a comic? A show?" Vector prodded, trying to make conversation, but at that moment Charmy giggled and threw his pacifier, which he had somehow managed to get unclipped. Espio straightened and immediately turned around with lightning speed, withdrawing a small knife from his boot and throwing it to catch the clip and spear into the wall next to the stairwell. Vector's jaw dropped, and Espio calmly went over to pry the weapon from the wood and withdraw the dangling pacifier. Charmy clapped his hands and babbled excitedly as the chameleon returned it, carefully placing the knife back in his large boot. Vector spluttered. "What… wait… where in chaos did ya get a knife?!"

"I… acquired it." Espio turned away. "Along with some other necessities that I have moved to my room while I waited for you to wake up."

"There's… more?" Vector couldn't stop the image of a child throwing a knife with pinpoint accuracy from replaying in his mind. That… wasn't a coincidence. No one could use a blade like that unless they had been trained. And now there were more weapons hidden in the chameleon's room? Vector hesitated, realizing that Espio might not have been kidding about being a ninja.

The pieces started falling into place. "So… who is Yuki? Is she a part of your family?"

”I do not wish to discuss this further.” Espio said firmly. “This conversation is at an end.”

”An energetic baby, a knife throwing kid.” Vector mumbled to himself as he made his way to Meredith and Hank’s front door. “An energetic baby, and a knife throwing, ninja kid…”

”Oh it’s the gumshoe.” Came Meredith’s huff, and Vector looked up, shifting his weight anxiously as he was starting to regret his decision to leave his two charges at home. From now on he should really make sure to keep an eye on them until he could get ahold of an adoption agency to see what the procedure was for returning lost children. Geez that sounded to cold… but what else could he do? “What do you want, Mr. Crocodile? And what did you do to my ghost?”

”Greetings, Ma’am!” Vector told her politely. “I was just stopping by to…”

”Yeah yeah, Hank left this check for you.” Meredith grumbled, handing the crocodile an envelope. “Guess you cracked the case, huh? My ghost hasn’t shown up here for—“

”I know, I know. That’s because he’s been staying with me the past two nights.” Vector explained, and Meredith blinked. “That’s right—he’s not a ghost. Turns out he was just a kid living on his own and trying to eat. That’s what I was tellin’ your grandson that night.”

”…You don’t say.” Meredith muttered, eyes narrowing. “And you’re sure it’s my ghost?”

”Yep!” Vector tried to keep the conversation short, really wanting to move along with his money so that he could get some more food to feed his—oh great Gaia, was he already thinking of them as his responsibility? Well, sure they were, but only until he could figure out his next steps. “He’s a chameleon, so he can turn invisible which is why you never saw him. And um… yeah apparently he’s a ninja or somethin’ which explains why we could never hear him or anything as well. He’s a sneaky little fellow, heh.”

”… How young are we talking?” She asked, and Vector hesitated.

”He’s ten.”

”And he was just tryin’ to get a meal?”

”Yes.”

”Where are his parents?”

”Not sure. I think he’s alone.”

”And who’s takin’ care of him now?”

”Well, I guess I am temporarily.”

”You?” Meredith scoffed. “You’re just a little spring chicken. How do you plan to take care of a kid? I doubt you’ve ever had one of your own.”

”I’ll figure it out!” Vector straightened, lifting his chin. “I’m a detective, you forget! I can manage any situation—“

”Yeah yeah, hold your horses.” Meredith muttered, waddling back inside and shutting the door in his face. Vector grimaced in irritation, foot tapping impatiently. Finally she opened the door again, shoving an old basket into his arms. “Here ya go. Thank me later.”

”What…” Vector froze when he opened the flap of the basket, seeing a bunch of rice cakes and seaweed inside.

”A growing boy needs to eat.” She huffed. “This was some of the stuff that I had planned for the days he didn’t show up. I don’t have much since I gave away all my old toys and supplies to my children and grandchildren, but remember to keep an eye on him. He needs to eat properly and stay hydrated and be given chances to be a kid. Y’know, explore and imagine and stuff.”

”Oh.” Vector blinked, taken aback. “Well, thank you—“

”Don’t thank me yet.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “A growing boy also needs to know that he’s cared for. You’re a role model now, got that? He’s gonna be watching you. Kids always watch their fathers more than they realize.”

”Woah, I’m not his father—“ Vector began, but Meredith scowled.

”Oh pish posh. You better treat my ghost right, you hear me?” She turned away. “Maybe he’ll get a new family through an adoption center or whatever, but you’d better go about that carefully. One of the worst things you can do to a child is make them feel unloved or unwanted, and that’s the truth.”

Chapter End Notes

Well Vector, even Meredith agrees that you’ve now become a father of two lol XD

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! :D

End Notes

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